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WISTONS

A STORY
IN THREE PARTS
BY MILES AMBER

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PART I

BETTY

CHAPTER I

Wistons is a vestige of the primeval forest that, ragged and irregular, encompasses a patch of ploughed and meadow land.

The Woolvenhurst who cut his wood and grubbed his land more than two hundred years ago cleared his acres by rule of thumb; and their outline might have been drawn by nature herself so carelessly does the cultivated land turn and curve and run in among the trees.

A lane skirts Wistons to the south-east, and leads from the Common beyond to Dunton village and to the road which, three miles off, joins the great highway to London.

The house stands by the lane with lawn and garden in front, and looks over them, and through the apple orchard into the woods. There is a side view across the lane and over fields trimmed with hedgerows and great elms to the village. Beyond the spire of the church, the soft outlines of the Downs close in the world—or shut it out.

Wistons is the estate of most importance and most interest within the parish bounds. For two and a

half centuries, from father to son, the three hundred acres have been lived on by their owner. If one of the line had ever had social ambition he might with some few airs have easily assumed the title of "Squire." There would have been no one to dispute it with him in a wide district leased to tenant farmers and belonging to a great landowner living remote in fabulous splendour.

In the village dwell the men who, from father to son, have ploughed and sown and reaped at Wistons, who know every clod as they turn it over, to whom every rise and dip of the land is familiar. To them Wistons supplies the want of other interests, social and political, the uncertainties of weather furnish the excitement of chance and speculation; but for them the forest would long ago have silently reclaimed its own, and they are so primitive in thought and in motive that their Saxon forefathers themselves were scarcely more so.

The man who first ploughed the land at Wistons built his house long and low; the life of the farm centred in it and sounded all around in yard and buildings, in fields and lane. His descendants had been a placid, contented race; they had never cleared another acre or, except for thinning, cut another tree. They had been educated at the nearest grammar school, they had married the daughters

of their neighbours and had accepted the laws of God and man with unimaginative approval. They had worked hard, had lived plainly, had saved money every year, cautiously investing it, and about the middle of the nineteenth century the owner of Wistons was rich enough to have taken farming easily and as a pastime rather than seriously and as a profession. But as a little fellow he had proudly followed at the plough-tail, he had learnt his work and, until he died, did his share as if his livelihood depended on it. To marry young was in the family traditions, and he would have followed them in this as in the others if the delicate girl to whom he gave his heart had lived. But she died, and Robert Woolvenhurst found nothing in his life to make him forget her through the busy and monotonous round of twenty succeeding years. When he was more than forty years old, at his bachelor condition and at his age the village chorus shook its head.

"It don't seem right with property coming down father to son time out o' mind. I've heerd my father say as his father towld he how as no one never knowed the time when there wornt a yew-tree in Dunton churchyard nor a Woolvenhurst at Wistons. Old master would turn in his grave if he knowed it, and there's no denying but 'twill be a

misfortune to the parish when he come to die and the place be sold. We knows Woolvenhursts and Woolvenhursts knows we, and we don't want no furriners comin' about the place a-terryfyin' folks with their new-fangled ways."

This is what the village chorus said as it shook its head and spat and held its pipe in stiff, thick fingers. Then it puffed in meditative silence and shook its head again.

"You allus knows where you be with a Woolvenhurst. Wages a bit ahead o' most anywheres and no unpleasantness over the size o' faggits from the Roughs."

A wink, sly laughter at the familiar joke, and smoking and silence for a minute or two. "Not that I holds with Jack Tribeses ways: wood-stacks maun be let bide. But Mr. Robert can settle with he: there be no call for Pleeceman Dimmick, as is from Chichester or further, to come a spying. I lay he wor surprised at the kind o' thanks he got at Wistons for his pains! He'll keep his blind eye that side next time he goes his prowls. They do say as he ha'nt been seen no more this side o' Winkfold since. Let un bide where they likes un, says I."

However, one summer afternoon, Robert Woolvenhurst put on his Sunday coat, walked gravely

down to the Rectory, and asked the pretty, middle-aged governess, whose last pupil had just outgrown the schoolroom and who was packing up to go away, to marry him. He told her about Georgina who had died, whom he had never forgotten, whom he never should forget. Laetitia, with moist eyes, answered that they would remember her together, and a year later, when the little boy was born, Mrs. Woolvenhurst looked up smiling at her husband and said—

"We should like him to be christened 'George,' shouldn't we, Robert?"

George was a quiet little boy whose volcanic possibilities were buried beneath the crust of his education. Implicit obedience to every one older than himself was the simple rule on which that education was based, and as he had no brother or sister with whom to quarrel or organise revolt, his childhood passed smoothly enough and to the satisfaction of the kindly folk about him. He loved to trot round the fields holding his father's hand, learning "how to be a farmer," and when he came indoors and sat down by his mother's side it never occurred to him that any little boy could find lessons disagreeable. When these were finished he and Betty played seriously with bricks and puzzles, or Betty read him stories with all the long words skipped.

Summer-time was best, for then he was allowed to spend long hours with Madgwick in the fields; he rode home high up on the loads and stood on the ricks when the hay was tossed up from below. In the autumn the corn shocks made little houses into which he crept. To the child to be with Madgwick seemed the height of earthly bliss; his eyes grew round and bright at the sight of him; if he passed before the window during lesson hours Laetitia knew that George's heart bounded across the sill to him, his voice shook, and his mother would drop something on the floor and tell him to pick it up for her, that there might be time for Madgwick to pass and for the little boy to recover his composure.

Betty had arrived at Wistons one day when she was a prim, pale little girl of twelve. Some one had written that this small offshoot of their family was left alone in a distant village, dependent on strangers. Laetitia traced her descent in the register of the family Bible and scented a duty. To Laetitia to discover duties was to succeed in life. Robert followed Laetitia's finger down the page with less enthusiasm and hesitated, but she, gently firm, said that a Woolvenhurst could not be left to the charity of strangers. She considerately added that George was a year old now, and that it was

almost necessary to have some one to help her to look after him.

So the letter was written, and the carrier brought the little cousin from Chichester in his canvas-hooded cart, and put her down at the end of the lane where the finger-post points "To Dunton."

"Here she be, Mrs. Woolvenhurst, and a good little gal too, but lor' bless you, ma'am, that old-fashioned!" Betty's bundle was small and light, and she held it by the knotted ends in one tiny hand. She got down carefully from the cart and stepped on to a dry spot in the road before she curtseyed and waited to be spoken to.

Laetitia, who was glowing with hospitable instincts and with a sense of duty to be fulfilled, felt puzzled how to reconcile the child's attitude with their relationship, but she took her disengaged hand in her own and said, "And so—and so you are Elizabeth Woolvenhurst, my dear."

"Betty Hurst, if you please, ma'am."

"Oh no, not Hurst, Woolvenhurst."

"If you please, ma'am, father said it was too long for poor people, and mother never could remember how to spell it, and so we're Hursts—we were Hursts, I mean." She fixed her large, shortsighted, light-brown eyes on Laetitia and paused for a moment before she continued with meek persistence:

"But if you please, ma'am, I shouldn't like to change now that I've buried poor father and mother with Hurst cut on the tombstone raised by the neighbours in respect. It's stone, ma'am, not painted wood."

Laetitia stared at the little figure before her and felt bewildered. It flashed through her mind that everything would have to be explained over again to Mrs. Milldown. For this was not the Elizabeth Woolvenhurst of her imagination whom she was to have educated and whose school-books, copy-books, and new slate were now ready in a row on a little shelf. Elizabeth was to have grown up to be a governess, with Wistons as a home and a refuge at all times. But Betty Hurst was totally unexpected, and Laetitia walked beside her along the road for ten minutes in silence, till Elizabeth had vanished into space and her practical mind had begun to work on Betty. She looked down at her and said in her calm, kind voice—

"And what do you wish to be, my dear, when you grow up?"

"If you please, ma'am, mother wished me to go into service: she said there were no anxieties." Service seemed so easy a solution of the problem that Laetitia felt instinctively suspicious of it. It would be so simple to train the child in household

work and start her on a self-sufficing career, whereas a governess has so many unsatisfied yearnings that Laetitia knew all about. They reached Wistons and went in at the side door and upstairs. Laetitia paused for a moment before she gave to Betty the room that had been prepared for Elizabeth, for this, too, was a matter that had to be referred to conscience. Betty's face flushed pink, she looked up with an expression of dumb gratitude in her eyes, and Laetitia stooped down and kissed her.

"This is your room, Betty Hurst, and you will live here, and this will be your home."

Betty put her bundle on a chair, and took off her hat and laid it and a little black cape on the bed. She smoothed her smooth hair, and followed Laetitia to another room to see the baby. The baby settled her fate. The neighbours had all had babies, and ever since she was five years old Betty had carried them about, hugged tightly to her, and jerked upwards when they slipped. So when Laetitia had bathed her son and put him to bed, Betty dropped her last curtsey and said, with a soft radiance overspreading her face—

"If you please, ma'am, I should like to be Master George's nurse."

Laetitia took her hand again as they went downstairs to find her husband, who patted the little girl

on the head and said she must be good and do everything Mrs. Woolvenhurst told her, and gave her half a crown "for a nest-egg."

They went on into the kitchen, and the cook stood still to listen, and nodded approval as she listened, to Laetitia's introduction—

"This is Betty Hurst, she will be the baby's nurse, and will have her meals with you; she would have had them with us, but she has chosen differently. She is our relation, her great-grandfather owned Wistons, and was our baby's great-grandfather too."

After tea Laetitia put on her bonnet and walked down to the Rectory and explained the new position to good-natured Mrs. Milldown, who approved of Betty Hurst as heartily as she had approved of Elizabeth Woolvenhurst.

"And send her down to-morrow with baby, it is only right that she should be able to say she has been to the Rectory. For you see she does belong to those Woolvenhurst tombstones, which are quite the handsomest in the churchyard."

As a compromise and in public recognition of the relationship it was settled that Betty should walk each Sunday to church with Mr. and Mrs. Woolvenhurst, and sit in their pew.

Betty could read and write, and had an exhaus-

tive knowledge of the Bible. She could also keep accounts with great accuracy by counting on her fingers, first adding up the figures from the bottom of the column, and then, to make quite sure, adding them downwards from the top. But grammar was outside her comprehension, and geography and history and other branches of knowledge she disliked with a violence that brought an expression of vindictive hatred into her small white face. At last Laetitia left her education alone, surprised and thankful that before she came to Wistons she had already learnt to write and read.

"Her needlework is something marvellous," she said apologetically to Mrs. Milldown, who replied—

"And next to her religion, what is more important to a woman than her needlework?"

CHAPTER II

When George was old enough he was sent to the Grammar School at Winkfold. He came home every Saturday in time for midday dinner and stayed till after tea on Sunday. He walked about the farm with his father, and spent as much time as he could with Madgwick, and he and his mother had at least one long talk together. The two held in common traditions of learning and culture. If Laetitia did not read many books, she respected them, and was proud that George had inherited her own father's love of them. From the day of his birth she had hoped that her son would follow in her father's steps and be an "Oxford man." She and the boy had little confidential talks together when they were alone. He was to try for a scholarship—to win one. It was to be a surprise for his father, and must never be talked about before him. This was Laetitia's one attempt at diplomacy in all her transparent life. She knew that Robert opposed innovations, and she knew that his opposition would grow with time and argument. To gain her way the struggle must be sudden and short.

George won the scholarship, and at Laetitia's request the headmaster of the Grammar School came over to break the news to Mr. Woolvenhurst. Robert was bewildered that it should be supposed a Woolvenhurst could require more education than Winkfold provided. But he was a just man, and admitted that "the mother's side of the boy's family had claims which it was fair should be considered." The scholarship itself was a hindrance rather than a help to Laetitia: her husband was suspicious of the value of advantages that were to be had for nothing.

"We can pay for our own educations, and don't need to be indebted to charity," he said, "though of course if you say they don't know to whom they're offering it I'm not the one to take offence and I shall be obliged if you will tell them this—with my compliments and thanks," he added a little stiffly. After a pause he went on—

"If I do make up my mind to send the boy to college, they'll see it was not a grudging spirit that made me hesitate. But we've never been discontented with old ways, and the Grammar School has always been good enough for us at Wistons. All the same, I'm not going back on what I said about his mother's family being considered."

The headmaster went into calculations, and Rob-

ert wrote them down in his pocket-book with a broad, blunt pencil.

George was puzzled at the effect of his triumph; at his father's gloom, his mother's anxiety. He wanted to talk to her, but she avoided being alone with him. In the evening he went into the old nursery where Betty sat and sewed, or took things out of cupboards and shook them and put them back again. Work was over for the day, and Betty was reading a chapter of the Bible. She stopped as he came into the room. He sat down in the armchair and said—

"Read out loud to me, Betty."

"You're only asking to please me, Master George, but it would please me more to come into your room sometimes and find you reading your Bible to yourself."

"Well, if you won't read it to me I'm going to stay here all the same."

Betty paused for a moment before she took up the book again and finished the chapter. Then she sat still with her hands in her lap: "I'm sorry to see your papa so upset, Master George," she began.

George looked up at her without speaking.

"It does seem such a pity there should ever be differences in families. Why can't we go on peace-

ful-like one year after another? It's changes and new ways as are so upsetting."

"You see they are not new ways in my mother's family, and she wants me to go to Oxford."

"I should have thought she would have been glad to have you settled at home, but of course if she wishes it, it's not for me to say she isn't right, though I've never concealed it from no one that I don't hold with so much education; I don't believe it was meant."

George was as much accustomed to the workings of Betty's mind as he was to the different levels of the old house: the steps up and the steps down again; the inconvenient corners and turnings; the rooms that were too small and crowded, and the rooms that were too large and bare. He neither criticised the house nor Betty, he adapted himself to both, probably because he had never been a week away from them, and perhaps, too, because there were no critics at Wistons to draw his attention to defects. He was a silent lad and he said nothing in reply to Betty, but stooped and turned over on its back the cat that was sleeping on the hearthrug.

"And if your papa gives in, when would you be going away?"

"In October, I think."

"Well, you'd want a new portmantle. Directly

I knew what was being thought of I went up into the loft and looked over the old boxes, but there! they're no use to no one. There's your mamma's own black trunk, but it's all cracked with dryness. I wonder whether the new one could be got at Winkfold or whether it wouldn't be better to give a whole day to it and take the coach to Chichester?"

"Betty," said George, "I'm not set on going unless my father ends by wishing it too."

"I'm very glad to hear you say so."

Suddenly he exclaimed with boyish eagerness—

"I wonder what Madgwick will think about it!"

"Madgwick ought to know his place well enough to have no opinion; and I should hope, Master George, that you won't make him forget it by asking him."

George did not reply, and while Betty was putting her spectacles back in their case Laetitia came into the room.

"Well, mother?" said her son.

Laetitia was agitated, and tried to calm herself before speaking. In all the years of her married life she had never experienced so much painful emotion as within the course of this last day.

"Your dear father is very good to me," she said at last, smiling, with tear-filled eyes. "He has given his consent; he wants to see you."

George kissed her.

"I wish it had turned out as we expected: we thought he would have been perfectly delighted, didn't we, mother?"

Laetitia gave him a little push—

"Go and thank him, my dearest boy. Oh, Betty!" she exclaimed, as the door closed behind him, "God grant that my way may be the right way, and that I haven't wished too wilfully and thought too lightly of the responsibility and the change."

"We're all in God's hands," said Betty solemnly, "we must leave everything to Him." Her face quivered and her eyes filled with tears; in another moment both were weeping.

George found his father standing on the hearth-rug; he went up to him and took his arm in the old, affectionate, childish way.

"It's very good of you, father, but I don't want to go unless you wish it; I shall be perfectly happy here with you and mother. I'd rather please you than anything; I've wanted to tell you so all day."

"You're a good lad, you've never done anything to displease me since you were born. I'd never thought about college before; it came so unexpected that it took me aback. I left school at fifteen, and

was glad enough. But when I reflected that you're as much your mother's son as you are mine, and that it's in her family, as it were, to go on from school to college, it seemed to pacify me, and I do declare I'm such a foolish old chap that now I'd rather have you go than not."

He burst into his kind, jolly laugh, and went on: "We'll have no more long faces at Wistons while I'm alive, and I'll never go back on that. Why, to-day has gone on and on till it seems like a year! But it's all right now, and you're going to college to please me. You tell your mother that, or I declare it's my opinion that she'll be refusing her consent to-morrow." George said nothing, but held his father's arm more tightly. Mr. Woolvenhurst was silent for a moment, then he said cheerily, but with a tremor in his voice: "Well, young man, I suppose you're going to tell me that you're glad?"

"O, father, I am! and I want to tell you so, but I don't know how; and I want to thank you and I can't; at least not as I feel. I do want to go to Oxford; I will work well: and you can't imagine how much I shall think of you and mother and of Wistons, and how happy I shall be to come back! You know I shall only be away for a few weeks at a time, I shall always be coming back. It seems already as if I loved you all more than before."

His father turned and held him for a moment in a close embrace.

"God bless you, my son," he said; "you have never given me anything but happiness since you were born."

George did not return to his mother: his shy, reserved nature had expanded as far as it could bear, and he went upstairs to his own room and lay long awake.

CHAPTER III

George took a fairly good degree at Oxford; during his last days there his father died suddenly of apoplexy. He went home to find a silent, composed household behind white window blinds. The dressmaker and the undertaker came, the coffin was brought down into the hall. Robert Woolvenhurst held solemn state in his old home for one week as the dead then did.

On the day of the funeral sandwiches and wine and white-sugared cakes tied up with black ribbon were set on the dining-room table, which was pulled out to be as long as it had been at George's christening party.

The neighbours came with kind, serious faces and shook George's hand long and emphatically. Laetitia did not leave her room, Mrs. Milldown and Betty sat there with her, and after the procession had gone away down the lane the three women took their prayer-books and together read the service for the burial of the dead.

When George came back the blinds were raised, there was a Sunday quiet about the house; Madg-

wick shut himself into the harness-room; Betty, in stiff black clothes, was in the old nursery. Mrs. Milldown had, as she expressed it, "slipped away" that George might find his mother alone.

Death had come and Death had gone, and the day after the funeral Life began again at Wistons just where it had stopped a week before. Laetitia, with drawn, sad face and soul submissive to the will of God, again took up the household duties; Betty's work-basket came out of the cupboard in the work-room; Madgwick could be heard giving orders and finding fault in the farmyard.

The only person left out of this revival was George. He had collapsed just when he should have realised the new responsibility of his position. He did not notice that Madgwick touched his cap when he spoke to him, and called him "sir," and came to him for orders. George hesitated and blundered as he answered, or stared at him as if he did not see him. Madgwick would go away muttering—

"Whatever be wrong with he? Master never should ha' let un go to college. I allus said as no good would come of it. But for all their colleges for sure he be Wistons born and bred, and didn't ought to look fair daft when, to show I knows my place like, I goes to un for orders."

One morning George was with his mother in the dining-room. She was sewing, he sat opposite to her on the sofa, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. He had not answered her last question, and she was going to repeat it, when he looked up suddenly and stared at her. She remembered that he used to come to her for help in childish difficulties, long ago, with this same wide-eyed, childish stare. She spoke again, but he did not hear. He sat up straight and pushed back the hair from his forehead; he was still staring at her, and he said suddenly—

"Mother, I'm married."

"Married!" she repeated. "Oh, George, you don't mean married?"

"Yes," he said, "yes." His voice was husky. Laetitia unconsciously folded up her work and put it in the basket.

"Married," she said again.

At first it seemed only surprising that it should be so, and she did not realise all that was involved. She asked one question after another, mechanically, as though she were indifferent to the answers.

"When?"

"A year ago."

"Is there a baby?"

"Not yet."

Laetitia began to think about the baby that was

coming, and then she forgot it and forgot George, and that unknown woman, who was his wife, seemed the only living creature of importance in the whole world.

"But who is she?" she cried.

George did not answer.

"Ah, I might have known! No good girl would have a secret marriage."

George looked at her with haggard, bewildered eyes.

"It's not what you think, nothing of the sort; and I don't believe she knows it was a secret marriage; I did that."

He leaned forward again in his former attitude.

Some calm, conventional person leaves for once the beaten track; a selfish man is for once unselfish; an unselfish one for once is selfish. But whenever a human being does something outside of, or in defiance of his own nature, the consequences are sure to be of a surprisingly serious kind. The talkative man chatters of his most intimate concerns, tells everything he knows of everybody, and it is as if water were spilt on sand; the reserved person makes one indiscreet revelation and finds everything about him changed.

To have been consistent with himself, George

should have come home at the death of his father to farm with Madgwick and collect a library. Slow, placid young men, for whom he felt mild friendship, would have visited him; in good time his mother would have chosen a pretty, well-brought-up girl to be her daughter-in-law. George would have proposed to her, he would have married her, and ease and tranquillity would have been assured to Wistons for at least another generation. But one day George's blood surged up, and blinded and bewildered him. Coming back from a long walk he passed a tent and some gypsy vans, and round the next turning of the road, leaning against a tree, waiting, he saw a girl, tall and slender, whose small head, crowned with masses of black hair, was set on a throat that was firm and round and encircled with the necklace of Venus. Her eyes were soft and dark, her lips and cheeks glowed with colour. She looked so pure, so shy, so palpitating with mystery that George went back to his rooms and wept to think of her. For the next few weeks he lived in a dream that simplified existence, for suddenly he discovered that everything in life, but love, was unimportant; now and then he shouted with delight that it was so. Once or twice he awoke in the night with a sudden pang at the thought of home and of his father and mother. But he sat up in bed and

frowned and clenched his fist and said aloud, in the dark, or with the light just stealing into the room—

"I will, I will, it is my right; it is my life, not theirs."

And then the remembered radiance of soft eyes, that looked at him for a moment and dropped their lids, lit up the darkness or made dim the dawn, and George lay down and slept again with a smile upon his lips.

Everything that did not concern the girl seemed remote and unimportant; everything that did was real and near and natural and right. She had relations who met him; there was a brother with whom he arranged the details of the marriage; a gaunt, indifferent mother who kept apart, and a father who appeared to expect money and to whom George gave it. But nothing seemed to him strange of which she was the central figure; all that was unconnected with her was unmeaning and unnecessary.

One day he had to wait a minute while a wedding party in conventional dress and order came out of church and crossed the pavement. "How preposterous!" he murmured. He began to despise things and people when, during brief intervals, they claimed his attention.

One marvellous day George married her; after-

wards, and quite quickly, everything seemed to grow commonplace again, but not in a comfortable, familiar way.

Uninterrupted contemplation of the lovely, unsmiling face became embarrassing. The harsh, unmirthful, always unexpected laughter startled him, the outbursts of temper paralysed him. There was no mystery and there was no meaning, it had all been a mistake, and every day the remembrance of home and the old familiar life grew clearer and more distinct.

If rash action had been natural to George he would have learnt how to evade consequences: he would have staved them off or would have compromised. But in the revulsion of feeling which followed when George awoke from his dream he turned back into the old, unquestioning way of accepting recognised standards and values. He had acted and he must take the consequences of his action, and the course before him was clear and defined. When he left Oxford for good his wife must accompany him. What must happen next his father and mother would decide, he felt more dependent on them now than he had done before his marriage. He walked, generally by the river, for hours, and thought of the inconvenient future and even more of the unembarrassed past. The old, inborn sensi-

tiveness to the opinion of others returned, and apart from the vital question as to the way in which his father and mother would be affected by his marriage, he thought of the friends and acquaintances who had known him since he was a boy, and their opinion also assumed importance. He felt as if life had all been arranged for him, that he had been in the hands of some benignant fate until he had taken this action on his own responsibility. Sometimes he forgot the present, and his thoughts went off on old familiar tracks, from which they returned with a jerk to the unfamiliar problems of his own making.

One day he could think of nothing but Madgwick, then in fancy he was in the village, in and out of the cottages. His thoughts wandered off to Mr. and Mrs. Milldown and to the day that their white cockatoo had arrived. Betty had taken him down to the Rectory to see it, and the bird shot up its crest and screamed, and frightened and astonished him. He looked up in Mrs. Milldown's face with tear-filled eyes and said, "I can't love the curelious bird," and when she kissed him and gave him sugar-candy, he thought she was forgiving him for being naughty.

How clearly he remembered that early stage of his existence when it was his duty indiscriminately

to love everybody and everything, in a descending scale, from God on a golden throne, to the woolly baa-lamb standing stiff on a painted board. He got more comfort from the thought of Betty than from anything else. He knew that in some way she would find out how to be on his side. It seemed as if the people he was thinking about had vanished for a time, and had now come back to him with increased importance.

He remembered that his mother liked everything to be explained. She had explained why Betty had become her maid when she ceased to be his nurse: his going to Oxford had required a good deal of explanation, now she would have to explain his marriage. Twice after his marriage when he went home for the vacation, leaving his wife in country lodgings close to Oxford, his depression and absence of mind were accounted for by his anxiety about his degree. When his father died, mixed with his first grief was relief that he would not have to tell him of his marriage. Not until the funeral was over and life had begun to move again in the old grooves did he realise with consternation that he was master at Wistons.

For a few days he was apathetic; he would do nothing, somehow or other things would have to settle themselves. Suddenly, without consciously

willing it, he looked up at his mother and said that he was married.

After George had told her as much as he understood himself of what had happened, they sat for some minutes in silence. When Laetitia looked at him again there was in his face such an expression of dumb hopelessness, almost of extinction, that she began to cry quietly, saying: "O my boy, my own poor boy!" She came across the room and sat down by him and put her arms round him and drew his head down on to her shoulder. But they had not the habit of showing emotion, and George was soon sitting upright again beside his mother, and she was settling what the future was to be.

In Laetitia's scheme of life duty loomed large. But there was clearly the duty you owed yourself as well as the duty you owed to others, and that it was often hard and difficult to do your duty to yourself, was proof sufficient that it must be done. Laetitia also felt that she owed it to her husband's memory not to suffer this indignity. She never hesitated in the instantaneous decision she had come to that she must leave Wistons. George's duty was as conspicuously clear: he must bring his wife home to his house, and his child must be born there. She thought of the different home-coming that she had planned for his bride, and of the little house

close to the Rectory that Robert in joke had always called "the dower house," where she would have gone to end her days. But her nature was too simple to find outcome in self-pity. She had kindred across the Downs, and to them she would go and near them she would live.

Betty was told, and she turned white and her lips trembled, but when Laetitia said: "And, Betty, we will go away together," she answered—

"If you please, ma'am, if there is a baby expected I feel sure you would wish me to remain and look after it."

Betty's Woolvenhurst blood asserted itself, and instinctively she ranged herself on George's side, and hardened her heart against criticism.

At the news, Mrs. Milldown raised her hands in horror, and the Rector shook his head in disapproving sadness, though he thought that after a time Laetitia might come back to the parish. Had George asked her to return perhaps she would have come. But he did not ask her: her place was lost and her return would have created complications.

Before he brought his wife home, George took his mother across the Downs, and Laetitia never again saw Wistons. Not infrequently George or Betty went over the hills to see her, and sometimes

they took the children with them; but the little girls went reluctantly and gazed at her with alien eyes. When Laetitia had been gone ten years she died. They brought her body back and laid it beside her husband's in Dunton churchyard.

CHAPTER IV

Betty received George's wife as she would have received her whether she had been princess or beggar before her marriage. When young Mrs. Woolvenhurst went up to her room on the night of her arrival at Wistons, Betty followed her and knocked at the door—there was something indescribably deferential in Betty's knock—and proceeded to wait upon her as she had waited on Laetitia. Bella was flattered and pleased by these attentions, she was also suspicious and embarrassed, and doubtful what to do for herself and what to allow Betty to do for her. She felt relieved when at last Betty stood by the door and said—

"Can I do nothing more for you, ma'am? Then I will wish you good-night."

Bella's perceptive faculties were keen, and she quickly adapted herself to her new life. One day she pleased George by telling him she wished she could read and write better, and the relationship of pupil and teacher seemed to draw them together: when it ceased he was surprised to find that they fell apart again at once. George had no knowledge

of character, he thought people differed in conduct from ignorance or by deliberate choice. He expected his wife to be changed when she had been educated by him. He did not suspect that she had made up her mind to learn because she was afraid that, when they discovered she could scarcely write and read, the servants would despise her.

Bella was by nature extraordinarily lazy; her occasional outbursts of energy were usually the outcome of temper or the effect of something strongly resented that touched her personally. Then like a soft, limp, wild animal she roused herself, every muscle braced, alert for defence or attack. The greater part of each day she spent in her own bedroom. When people came to the front door she watched them from behind the white curtains in her windows. Downstairs George received the visitors, who became rarer as the years passed. Sometimes his wife, who had theories of her own about every one in their relation to herself, would surprise them by appearing suddenly, in bright clothes, with an air of challenge. Her beauty was of the grand kind, and she seemed conscious of it as of some weapon with which she could rout her enemies. Looking like an indignant goddess, watchful and resentful, she would descend on some timid, kindly, dull woman who had at last made up her mind to

call on "those poor creatures at Wistons." With the servants she was never familiar, she often imagined they were rude to her and frequently dismissed them. It was Betty who made peace next day. That she was mistress of Wistons was what Bella was most concerned with. She felt her power within the house, she had little interest in anything beyond the garden and the farmyard. The sight of food pleased her; she handled the meat when the butcher brought it, she poked it with her fingers and often cut it up herself. She would go into the poultry-yard and choose the fowls and ducks for killing, and thence into the kitchen garden and pull the peas or walk along the rows of cabbages and cut some of them; the gardener's boy followed her with a basket, into which she flung the vegetables. She was so beautiful that everything she did would have looked poetical to a disinterested æsthetic beholder, had there been one then at Wistons. Through all her moods and through all her occupations Betty's pertinacious respect followed her. George shrank from her and lived a solitary life in the room downstairs that he had made his library. When she could read and write to her own satisfaction there seemed nothing left for them to say to each other. She took a big Bible and put it on a shelf near her bed; one day the plays of Shake-

speare attracted her, and she carried the heavy volume upstairs. Later a book of cookery and a book of domestic medicine and a large illustrated Book of Common Prayer were found by her and taken to her room, and there her collection stopped. She used to go early to bed, and sit up reading, or playing "patience" with the cards spread out before her on the bedclothes.

George settled down into a life of monotonous routine. He had made one great failure and, unresistingly, he bowed to fate. He was naturally shy and reserved, and by degrees he seemed to lose the need of human companionship. He rode alone, and walked and read alone. But he kept from habit an interest in the farm, and he had daily consultations with Madgwick in the farmyard or the fields. He was not greatly interested in his children, he was without the sense of parental responsibility, and as they grew he took it for granted that Betty should take care of them and that when they were naughty she must make them good again. He himself generally obeyed Betty's orders which she gave him disguised as suggestions: "If I was you, Mr. George," or "I've been thinking, Mr. George."

Rhoda was born just one year after Esther, and when they were weaned Betty became to all intents

and purposes their mother, their real mother having lost her strongest interest in them at this palpable separation between herself and them.

Betty's workroom was once more the nursery: sometimes she carried a mattress on to the lawn and the babies lay there and kicked, or crawled upon the grass with Betty's watchful eyes upon them. Bella spent hours leaning out of her window looking at them. She liked to watch the movements and occupations of others and to do nothing herself.

While the children were so small they seemed for a short time to make a fresh bond between the parents. George would come out of his room laughing at their quaint ways and their soft roundness. He would pick them up and run across the lawn with them and hold them up to look at their mother as she leant out of the window above, and clapped her hands to them and contracted her face into smiles that never naturally overspread it. They were all young then and the babies were without opposing wills, lovely playthings that Betty took care of and put away at night.

It was pretty to see four-year-old Esther when the spring came round again, with her twelve months of additional experience and some faint memory of last year, take Rhoda into the garden and introduce her to the flowers. Betty was iron-

ing at the table in the window, Esther held Rhoda's fat hand in her own and led her towards the crowded borders. She stopped on the way to put her arms round her and say, "Dear 'ittle baby, Betty and me loves you." Rhoda resisted the embrace, and they fell together with a bump upon the grass; pushing the ground from them with their dimpled hands, they got gravely up again. "Bells, baby, bells," said Esther pointing to the candelabra-like "Canterbury bells." Rhoda screamed with delight and held out her arms to reach them, throwing herself against the stem which gave way and fell with her. Esther shrieked "Naughty, naughty baby," Betty ran out and picked her up. Esther stroked the fallen flower saying "poor, poor," and came back to Betty with crumpled pinafore and small, earth-stained hands held out before her.

When Betty could manage to keep Bella in good humour there was peace at Wistons. But she sometimes broke into storms unaccountably, as does the weather, or lashed herself into a frenzy at some fancied slight or neglect. Then all that could be done was to wait until she was quiet again. George locked his door and paced the room with his hands in his pockets, his head hung down, while his wife beat furiously against the panels with her open hands and screamed to him to open to her, or made

inarticulate, hoarse sounds like a wild animal, or shouted in some strange language which he did not understand. In the nursery Betty held her ground, very pale, with compressed white lips. She went on with her occupations taking no notice of Bella, who stamped and screamed and gesticulated with her clenched fists raised above her head. There was a large table on the dark side of the room with a flap that fell down in front, and a tablecloth that overhung the sides. When upstairs the doors began to bang and a furious voice to shout, Betty said, "Run in there and stay quiet till I tell you to come out."

Children live a life apart, they put up with their surroundings and adapt themselves to them as mankind has accommodated itself to earthquakes and volcanoes, to the equator and the arctic circle. The children took shelter under the table from their mother's rage as they sheltered out of doors beneath thick branches when the rain was pelting down. When either storm was over they came out chirping like the birds and went on with their little lives and forgot the interruption.

These early years of theirs were the happiest of Betty's life; happier even than those years, long ago, when she took care of George and played with him. Betty was in the position of prime minister

to a constitutional sovereign, she observed forms and ceremonies, and was a stickler for etiquette, but she kept the government in her own hands and as yet feared neither rival nor revolt. It was she who taught the children to walk and to say their prayers; clinging to her skirts they first became conscious of the earth and sky, and made acquaintance with the birds and beasts and plants, with which during the miraculous long years of childhood they were to live on terms of equality and mutual understanding. Betty carried Rhoda in her arms to the woods while Esther toddled by her side, the big dog following, smiling, his tongue hanging out, his white teeth glistening. He lay down beside them when they stopped above the sandpit to build little moss houses for the fairies. Esther leaned against him or pushed him out of the way, and did not know that there was any great gulf fixed between her estate and his; and Niger never knew, because he grew old and died before she found it out.

Betty considered it was right that the children should go at least once a day to see their mother, so a quarter of an hour before their tea-time she took them to her room, and there they stood and stared at her while she talked to Betty about their clothes. She would pull their frocks down with a jerk and say, "Have they plenty of everything?

Don't let them out-grow their shoes. I won't have their toes cramped. They must have new frocks, give away their old things in the village." To end the interview Betty invariably said, "Now kiss your dear mamma, for I think the nursery tea is ready, ma'am." Mrs. Woolvenhurst never clasped the children or held them on her knee, but Betty had taught them to put their arms round her neck and kiss her cheek, and when they had done this the little party went away.

In these days Betty's face was radiant, her little world, on the whole, was very manageable. If Rhoda already wanted her own way sometimes in opposition to Betty's, it was such a funny little way, and she could always be lifted into a high chair and kept there till she had forgotten it. If Esther would sometimes cry "for nothing," she nearly always stopped when Betty took her on her lap in the low rocking-chair and rocked her to and fro and kissed her.

Three or four times a year Mrs. Woolvenhurst drove into Winkfold. The excursion was planned many days before. Should the carriage be open or shut? Should there be one horse or two horses? When all was arranged Betty wrote the order, and the boy was sent with it to the town. These drives were great events in their lives, and preparations

for one of them began an hour before they started. It would have been more convenient to dress the children last, but Betty's code of etiquette required that they should be ready before their mother. She put on their frocks and hats and capes, and pulled and twisted silk gloves on to the little hands held stiffly up to her. When they were ready she left them seated at the table with picture-books before them. At the door she turned round with an anxious face and shook a threatening finger: "Now I dare you to move before I come back." Before she was big enough to defy authority Rhoda had a way of obeying Betty's orders as if it were she herself who had given them, and she sat still and turned over the pages of her picture-book in Betty's absence. Esther got down from her chair when the door was closed, and walked on tip-toe about the nursery as if it were a new room to be explored. When Betty returned both children were where she had left them, and she was discreet and asked no questions. Betty dressed Mrs. Woolvenhurst as carefully as she had dressed the children. Bella was a girl in age, with splendid health and strength, but she did nothing for herself that Betty would do for her. So Betty put on her boots and her cloak, and tied the strings of her bonnet, and worked her gloves on to her fingers. Money

was taken from a secret hoard known only to themselves. Bella was fond of gold coins, she liked to put her hand into the bag that held them and let them slip through her fingers. As the carriage drove to the door Betty hurried to her own room and hastily dressed herself. She took out of a drawer the old-fashioned brown parasol with the folding handle, without which she never drove, though she blinked her eyes in the sun and did not open it. Betty had all sorts of little rules of behaviour. She would have thought it ungrateful to Laetitia, who had given her the parasol, not to take it in the carriage, but she would have considered it disrespectful to Bella to open it in her presence. In the carriage Esther sat by her mother, and Rhoda by Betty, who held her hand. The children were impressed with the importance of these drives, and looked about them with solemn eyes. When she drove Bella felt defiant. She would have been too shy to walk into the town, but she felt safe driving along, passing people quickly, with the added advantage of being on a higher level than those who were walking.

The little party always attracted attention. People who recognised them stared with curiosity, and strangers stared with admiration at the beautiful young mother and her children. Sometimes

when they had passed people Bella would say: "Betty, you can see behind us, are they looking back? Are they laughing?" Strangers were of vast importance to Bella; she feared or suspected or hated them at first sight. One must be many removes from the Road and the Heath to look with indifference on unknown men and women. Now and then some one bowed to her, and then her face flushed and glowed like a pomegranate flower as she brusquely nodded back. When men stared at her with bold, wide-eyed admiration, she clenched her teeth, her eyes flashed, she wished to strike them. But if the doctor's wife or the lawyer's passed them with a half-nervous, half-supercilious bow Bella quivered from head to foot with the sense of her own beauty. "Look at her!" she would cry to Betty, "she's fat and she's short, and just see her horrid, ugly children!" Betty said, "Yes, ma'am," but she wished that Mrs. Woolvenhurst would lower her voice, and hoped, as she did not, that the noise of the wheels drowned it. Betty was extremely proud of the beauty of the children and their mother, and glad that "those as think they can look down on us" should be forced to admit it, but her cheeks were pink with varying emotions from the moment the carriage turned out of the lanes on to the high road.

When they reached Winkfold they stopped at the shops and Betty went in to select things that the tradesmen took out to the carriage for Mrs. Woolvenhurst, half suspicious and half proud, to choose from. She liked the men to stand there bowing to her, and she bought largely, saving up money for these expeditions. The carriage waited at the grocer's, the ironmonger's, the confectioner's, the draper's. Bella's cupboards at home were filled with things; it pleased her to take out of them lengths of silk, of wool, to unfold them and look at them; when she was pleased with the servants she gave them presents of stuff for gowns.

George met them when they came back and lifted the children out of the carriage, and Betty took them away to change their fine clothes. He listened patiently to what his wife told him; she was always voluble and excited after driving. Soon Betty came back, saying—

"Shall I take your things, ma'am? or are you coming upstairs yourself? The parcels are in your room."

George, left alone, went for a walk in the woods. He made no confidences, and Betty listened to no criticisms. If Mrs. Woolvenhurst did live in her room much as if it had been her ancestral tent,

and emerged from it more or less in the character of a raider, Betty cut short any remarks that were made in her presence by saying: "One person's no odder than another, and I don't want to hear no more about it."

CHAPTER V

"Betty," one day said Esther, "there's a little voice inside me what says things only me can hear."

Betty looked up from her sewing and reflected a moment before she answered.

"Why, that's nothing; that's thinking. Some people think out loud to theirselves, but there's no sense in doing that. You're only thinking; we all have to."

In some such fashion did Betty explain the unexplainable and initiate the children into life; and they grew and changed, while the seasons came round the same and found them different.

Rhoda began to take life very positively: she wanted this and held out her hands and cried for it, and she did not want that and would not have it. She paid very little attention to any one who was neither in her way nor useful to her, but she had always been fascinated by her mother. When Betty first began to take the children to Mrs. Woolvenhurst's room Rhoda looked only at her mother, and when she was carried away, the baby head turned sharply over Betty's shoulder and the dark

eyes were fixed upon Bella till the door closed between them. When she began to run about Betty often heard her stump up the stairs and beat the door till Bella opened it. She stood at her mother's elbow and watched the cards spread out in rows or half circles, or sat down at her feet on a large, old-fashioned footstool and played with her toys. "I declare they seem to understand each other," said Betty to herself, surprised. The understanding between Rhoda and her mother did not find expression in tender little coaxing speeches or caressing ways on Bella's part. She seemed content when the child was with her, and not to miss her when she stayed away. Rhoda followed her into the garden and the farmyard and, when she was big enough, caught the fowls and brought them to her that Bella might hold them, head downward, by their legs and feel their weight and choose the heaviest for killing. They searched for new-laid eggs together and stood watching the cows milked: Bella was never tired of seeing and hearing the milk fall into the pail.

One morning, when the children were very young, Bella took a handful of gold money from the bag in her wardrobe and walked out of the front door. Rhoda was in the garden, she clutched her mother's skirt as she passed, and held it tight

and ran along beside her. Bella took no notice, but shook her gown in a preoccupied way when the child stumbled and clung to it till she recovered her footing. They followed the lane to the gate that shuts off Dunton Common. Bella's brother was waiting for her, and they stood, one on each side of the gate, talking together in Romany. The man pointed to Rhoda and asked some question. Bella stooped and lifted her over the gate and put her in his arms, saying, "Rhoda's uncle." Rhoda stiffened herself and drew back from him, and struck his face with her hands. He laughed uproariously and said—

"Rhoda must love her uncle."

"Rhoda not love you; Rhoda go home with her mamma."

The man turned round and pretended he would carry her off; Rhoda kicked and fought and struggled to get away. Bella called out to him to stop, and took some money from her pocket and shook it in her hands. He turned back at the sound of the clinking coins and put Rhoda down over the gate, where she stood silent again, holding her mother's gown and staring at him, while Bella slowly dropped the coins one by one into his hands. "Give Rhoda; Rhoda want some." Bella picked out two half sovereigns and pressed one into the

palm of each small hand. Her brother grumbled and made a grab at them through the bars of the gate. Bella pushed the child behind her and caught his arm and gave it a savage twist. The man, using violent words, freed himself from her and stood back from the gate rubbing his arm; but they were soon talking together again in friendly fashion. Bella was persuading him to come and see her house, and he laughed and shook his head. Suddenly she opened the gate and gripped his hand and tried to pull him through, but he shook her off and moved away, and she let the gate swing to, and watched him climb the rising ground through the gorse and disappear over the crest without once looking round at her. She stood there for a minute, and then turned towards Wistons with Rhoda holding fast to her skirt and saying to herself, "Rhoda's uncle, Rhoda's naughty uncle." Bella dawdled on her way back, looked for birds' nests in the hedges, teased the young birds with a finger-tip stuck in their large, wide mouths. Rhoda wanted to be lifted up to see, but her mother was preoccupied by her own interest in them and Rhoda screamed and stamped in vain, Bella's fine nerves being proof against the discord. Near the house the child let go her mother's gown and looked at her two empty hands—

"All gone; poor Rhoda, poor little Rhoda."

Bella slapped her.

"Naughty Rhoda; Rhoda find them at once."

Rhoda sat down in the road and filled her hands with loose sand. Each time as it slipped through her fingers, she looked carefully in her fat fists for the coins.

"Oh, get up," said Bella at last, when she was tired of looking on, and they went through the garden gate and back into the house together. For the rest of the day Rhoda talked of her "naughty uncle" and in the evening Betty asked Madgwick if the gypsies were about.

"I seed the smoke o' their fires away to the east; but they ha'nt been within two mile o' Dunton, I should say."

Betty reflected for a moment before she said "Good-night" to Madgwick and went indoors.

Down in the village the Rector and Mrs. Milldown thought a great deal about the family at Wistons. George had grown intangibly distant and unapproachable. He very rarely came to church, and never when Communion was celebrated: his wife, on the contrary, always received the Sacrament, and she walked up the chancel with so fierce an air that, remembering it, Mr. Milldown had

never the courage to inquire whether she had been christened and confirmed.

"And it's scarcely likely that she has," he said with an anxious sense of responsibility as he stirred his tea and looked across the table at his wife.

"Oh never mind, my dear," said Mrs. Milldown, who came of a Dissenting family and whose early Nonconformity sometimes mildly asserted itself, "let us be thankful for any sign that she isn't an out-and-out heathen. It brings the tears to my eyes to think of the old days and Laetitia and Mr. Woolvenhurst and little George and Betty all in their pew twice every Sunday. I've never found a friend to take Laetitia's place, and I never shall."

The Rector shook his head, and said for the thousandth time—

"She should have stayed in the parish."

"I don't see how she could come back now," said Mrs. Milldown; "why, who knows how many of that girl's relations may be camping out within a mile of us this very night? I never pass the gypsies without looking the other way out of respect for poor Laetitia."

The village, on the whole, approved of Mrs. Woolvenhurst and threw doubts on the legend of her gypsy origin. She gave away lavishly, through

Betty, and she took very little notice of any one, and the Duntoners were disposed to think these traits typical of a real lady. There should, of course, have been a son at Wistons, an indisputable heir, that a Woolvenhurst might continue to do his duty by the land and keep out "furriners." "There's no reck'ning on gals or who they'll take up with," was the opinion of a community which believed in the subjection of woman as a practice only to be departed from when she married "a poor-sperited creetur as don't know his own mind." Nevertheless the little girls were welcome in every cottage home, and had many kindly looks and words as on Sundays they walked to church across the Green. They were very young when they began their church-going and after service Mrs. Milldown used to beckon them into the Rectory and give them sweets and picture-books while she had a little private talk with Betty and made the most of the scanty information that was forthcoming. The second time that they went through the churchyard Esther asked what the grassy mounds were for?

"Why, they're the graves, of course, where we're put when we're dead."

"Oh, Betty, shall you be in one?"

"Why, of course I shall."

"Then I shall come and sit upon it very often Betty dear, and daisies is nice little flowers for the top of you."

But the next Sunday a grave had been dug close to the path, and they peeped down into it as they passed by. Esther pointed to the bottom of the deep hole and said, "Not all down there, Betty, just on the top like the others!"

"Why, no one's on the top, it wouldn't be allowed; they're all down deep. The mounds are on the top to mark the sizes; the children have little ones. Whatever are you thinking of, Miss Esther?"

Esther did not answer, she began to cry, and when they reached the church door she was sobbing. Betty shook her—she always shook the children when they were very perplexing; sometimes it seemed to set things right. Rhoda looked up and said complacently—

"Rhoda likes them deep, Betty; Rhoda's good. Rhoda likes them very deepest gaves. Betty's gave shall be much more deeper."

"I do declare," said Betty, "I don't think either of you is fit to go to church to-day. Whatever can make you both so strange?"

At this unexpected disapproval Rhoda's underlip began to quiver, but to Betty's relief Esther left

off crying and let her eyes be dried. Betty hastily kissed them both and got them settled in their places before service began.

The children were happy in those first years. Betty loved them and ruled them, if not quite wisely and justly, perhaps well enough to fit them for the later life and love that seldom seem to be the result of perfect justice and wisdom. When she slapped and shook them, what caused her to do so was not always clear. But in a well-organized nursery, where reason rules, the nurslings are perhaps no better prepared for the unaccountable and undeserved that follows. Betty's slaps seemed sometimes dealt at random, and Esther would drop her doll to clasp Rhoda in her arms and wipe the tears from her indignant eyes. Evening found them at Betty's knee saying "Our Father," and praying for dear friends and relations in the same words that George had used long ago, his face in his mother's lap. Afterwards they stood up with tight-shut eyes and said a hymn and dropped deep, unsteady curtseys at the name of Jesus. If the hymn was long and His name was repeated several times they began it in front of Betty and ended it with a bump against the wall.

In some remarkable way of her own Betty

taught the little girls to read. She was surprised and almost shocked at the rapidity with which they learnt; it seemed scarcely natural, she thought. They learnt to write more slowly, which provoked her, "For," she said, "it cannot be denied that writing is a necessity." Directly the children could read with ease they were never without a book in their hands; if Betty had allowed it they would have read at meals; but this, with conscious rectitude, she forbade. Unlike their father when he was a child, they never wished her to read aloud to them, and this was to Betty both a grievance and a relief. They were, though, always ready to read aloud to her, and Betty listened to endless fairy stories, because "it kept the children quiet." A little later she listened to the Bible with misgivings that, though it would have shown proper religious feeling on their part to like to read it regularly and often, it was unusual, and therefore probably reprehensible, to read it straight on until meals or bed-time stopped them. They chose, too, to read it with dramatic expression and gesture, and were ready at any moment to argue with Betty that so it should be read. To her mind it savoured of blasphemy to stand up at "Thus saith the Lord" with frowning brows and outstretched hand.

Betty tried to put the thought far from her, but

she knew the day would come when she would find herself between the horns of a dilemma—the children would either have to go to school or there must be a governess at home. Betty flushed when she thought of it, and hated the Tree of Knowledge as cordially as Eve may have done after she left Paradise. Sometimes she took down the old school books from their top shelves and looked at the strange sentences and the unmeaning information that they contained.

"There," she said, shoving in a book and mechanically pulling it out again even with the rest, "I sometimes wonder whether it's a sign of wickedness on my part to hate them as I do; I'd like to see them all burnt, I would."

Now that the children were too big to be sent under the table when their mother was raging through the house Esther always ran away and hid; but Rhoda, undismayed, gazed with such calm, inquiring eyes, that Bella would suddenly become quiet and softly strike the back of her head with her open hand, and sigh and look confused, or screw her face up till the tears came.

"Oh, don't, mamma, I can't bear to see you cry, my own lovely mamma. Let me dry the tears from your large, dark eyes." Then Bella held her face quite still and Rhoda stood upon a chair and

wiped them with her handkerchief, "Now no one can see you have been crying, and we will forget it."

When the children went at half-past eight to bid their mother good-night they generally found her in bed, propped up with pillows, playing cards or reading with a lamp beside her. If the book were the Bible or Shakespeare, and not cookery or medicine, she liked to keep them with her and to read aloud to them. She read with mouthings and gesticulations, and expressed emotion with exaggeration that would have made her a popular actress in a travelling show. The little girls were filled with admiration; with sudden enthusiasm Rhoda clapped her hands and cried out—

"Oh, my most beautiful mamma, you couldn't be more lovelier if you were a queen!"

Esther, watching the clock, wished the time would not fly so fast, and felt remorseful pangs of heart for Betty, tired and disapproving, waiting to put them to bed. She broke away at the most thrilling part, first whispering to Rhoda to come soon. She was very conscious of conflicting wills and interests; she seemed to stand at cross roads, where they all met.

Esther found out very early that her questions on the nature of things did not receive very satis-

factory answers, and, like other children who make the same discovery, she formed theories of her own to account for the unaccountable. When the sun, through rifts behind dark banks of cloud, sent down bright shafts of light from heaven to earth, Esther said authoritatively, "There is God's throne," and both children knelt down and bowed their foreheads to the ground.

Each human body begins at the lowest stage at which life has dawned and ends at the highest point that life has reached, as Man.

But the soul no one can index, or predict of it and say: Thus must it begin, must continue and must end. For each soul travels on an untrodden road and goes its lonely way, in perfect isolation, to the unknown goal.

CHAPTER VI

When childhood succeeded infancy the children claimed the right of private judgment, and Betty, though she, like other tyrants, opposed it, retreated before its insidious advance.

It was when they were big enough to make a friend of Madgwick that Betty had the first uneasy suspicion that power was slipping from her. He taught them to ride until, proud of their horsemanship, sorry that there was nothing more for him to teach, he said, half-grumbling, that they could ride with anybody in the county, and sent them off together to the forest on the Downs, or to some church steeple ten miles off, telling them to be sure not to come back the way they went. To trot about at Madgwick's heels was bliss to them as it had been to their father, and now for them Great Pan lived again through happy days of fellowship and understanding with birds and beasts and woods and stream. The brook was their sylvan deity, responsible for their good or ill-fortune. Sometimes, in gratitude, they flung him garlands and watched the flowers float out of sight;

sometimes, indignantly, they pelted him with stones. But they were never long away from the brown stream and the mossy banks and the overhanging trees.

There were drawbacks and disasters, for often the gods are fickle and furious, and sometimes schemes of untold bliss were shattered by their clumsy interference. Their mother, unexpected as a storm that on a June morning follows a pink sunset, would appear in their path, and without listening to one word of explanation, drive them indoors when even Betty did not want them there. But it all appeared elemental to the children, the play of blind forces that they must bow to or their childish wit must turn. When nothing else could be done, when every one was too unreasonable, there was the last desperate resort: to snatch a cake or a loaf and cheese from the kitchen, take to the woods, and stay in them all day.

They ran first to the brook before they went on deeper into the woods, where Madgwick was sure to appear at midday with the most delicious food. And what repasts those were! What delightful talk, what perfect courtesy and social and intellectual equality as Madgwick shared the provisions they had brought or cut off hunks of bacon, and on the point of his clasp knife handed it round.

Effie had her share with them, not, like a mere house-dog, after they had finished. In spring the cuckoo flew overhead, and he is never heard unmarked. In autumn the pheasants rose up before them: "There now," said Madgwick as Effie, quivering with excitement, looked up at him. "The old gal's as artful as a Christian. She knows it's too soon by a fortnight, yet there she stands and winks at me to fire away and she'll not tell! And many's the time she've not told neither." The children had heard it a hundred times; they patted the little terrier with admiring affection. As they followed Madgwick through the woods, here and there he marked a tree for felling, and they begged it off. "Oh not this one, please not this!" and Madgwick grumbled as he promised that the tree should stand. There were two or three fields to be walked over and a new calf to be visited in the cowshed before it was tea time and Betty must be faced. The wonderful afternoon ended in the farmyard, where Madgwick lingered politely for a few last moments before he said—

"There now, you run in and tell Miss Hurst I be a-coming round to-morrow to explain; she won't say nothing to you then!"

As Rhoda trotted along she said, "Madgwick is most clever, he knows exactly when my black rab-

bit will have young ones; it's really astrordinary. When we're grown up and everybody else is dead, Madgwick and Effie shall live in the house with us, shan't they?"

Esther reflected.

"I shouldn't like the others to be dead."

"But they won't allow it if they're not dead."

"Perhaps Madgwick would rather not live in the house; I think he'd be sorry for them all to be dead."

Rhoda said no more, she began to notice that she was hungry and to think of tea and Betty. They passed their father's room and saw him reading, and glanced up at their mother's window. They feared no punishment from those quarters—

"One can always trust Betty not to tell."

Rhoda pushed Esther before her into the nursery, saying—

"Go in and tell her we're sorry, Esther, but you're not to say we'll never do it again."

It was never quite certain how Betty would receive them: in early days she used to clutch an arm of each child and shake her, but now that they were almost as tall as herself she was oftener reproachful than angry. When her face began to quiver and she said they would be sorry when she was dead, Esther cried and begged her to forgive

them. Betty seldom began a quarrel without wishing herself well out of it, so her forgiveness was promptly forced upon Rhoda and gratefully accepted by Esther. Besides, Madgwick was a formidable rival and Betty's instinct told her that if she wished to baffle his machinations she must offer counter attractions. The tea of reconciliation was particularly sweet; there was a store of little dainties to set off against the cold bacon of the morning. The evening was chilly; Rhoda knelt down at the bright fire and made toast that presently swam in butter.

"It's heavenly, Betty dear; you'll have to eat it with a spoon!"

They were very cosy and very happy; Betty looked at them with the fondest affection as she told them stories of what happened when she was a little girl and first came to Wistons. Esther's head was crammed with fairy tales and stories of romance, and she asked suddenly, "Betty, why are you not married?"

Betty paused a moment before she answered, her large, short-sighted eyes fixed on Esther, but really seeing back into the past. "I never could bring myself to it, for I never did like strangers, and it's generally strangers as people has to marry. There was a young man I went so far as to walk

out with. All girls are vain, I suppose, for I was pleased to do it."

"Betty," interrupted Esther, "do you think he was a prince in disguise? Was he tall and dark with a small moustache, or very slender with fair hair and blue eyes?"

"Oh dear no, Miss Esther, quite different; but I do believe I might have been keeping company with him now only he wouldn't let things stop there. And at last it made me that nervous never to know where I shouldn't meet him of a Sunday that, except to go with the family to church, for three months I never went out of sight of the windows, and he was much too modest to show himself so conspicuous. It quite discouraged him, and he left a good situation at the chemist's and went away from Winkfold."

"Did he never send you any presents, Betty dear?" said Esther, still thinking of the prince, "not a white pony or a necklace of pearls?"

"Good gracious, no! whatever can you be thinking of, Miss Esther? The following Christmas I did get a fancy box of lozenges, and I can't think who sent it if it wasn't him; you know it well enough, I keep the boot-buttons in it. But it's years ago, and I daresay he's married by now, for as a rule men are most inconstant."

"Not when they're princes, Betty darling. A prince will wait a hundred years and not mind in the least. When I marry it will be a prince. He will come here to find me and we shall ride away together over the Downs. He will come on a coal-black steed, leading a snow-white pony. And oh, Betty dear, I shall not stay away very long. I shall come back to see you, and I shall never forget any one."

"Betty," said Rhoda, "I shall go away, very, very far away, and I think I would rather marry a magician."

Esther's soft brows knit anxiously.

"Magicians are nearly always most dreadfully wicked," she said.

"If he is wicked," said Rhoda, "I shall send him back into the brass bottle and throw it into the deepest, deepest sea!"

"Well," said Betty, "as to princes, I suppose they are to be seen in London, but there's no such people as magicians, I'm sure of that."

"Oh no, Betty, no, no, don't say there's none! I want there to be magicians and fairies. There must be fairies. I've almost seen them when I was quite alone; and when I've shut my eyes and stood quite still I have heard them. I wouldn't care to go to the woods, at least not without Madg-

wick, if it was quite certain there wasn't any fairies."

"And I," said Betty, "wouldn't go if I was certain there was. I should be afraid of treading on them."

The nursery door stood open when the children were in bed, for Betty often had to go upstairs again before they slept. Rhoda's calm voice called "Betty," with an octave between the two syllables.

"Now, Miss Rhoda, why don't you go to sleep?"

"I think there are tigers under the bed, Betty; please look."

As Betty looked she remonstrated: "You know quite well as tigers live with lions in their jungles. Lie down, Miss Rhoda, and let me tuck you up."

"Betty," exclaimed a more agitated voice from the next room, "Betty, come here, I am almost sure that there are ghosts dancing on the lawn."

"Now go to sleep, Miss Esther; ghosts never dance on the lawn."

Betty did not believe in fairies and magicians, nor in ghosts that danced on the lawn; but she was prepared to swear by the ghost that rattled its chains close to the disused lime-kiln in the lane going to Dunton, and the children always made a long round home after dusk that they might not

pass it, for, as Betty said, "When you come to think of graves and skeletons, ghosts seem most natural." Betty did not spare them allusions to deaths and funerals. "They're a part of religion," she said, "and I've always thought it would be wrong to go out of my way to avoid seeing corpses."

Accordingly one day when the cook's little brother died, Betty took the little girls to see him lying in his coffin. But when they got to the cottage Rhoda refused to go in: "I can't, indeed I can't," she said firmly, and ran away.

Esther was shaking, but when the child's mother opened the door and seemed to be expecting them, she went in and stared, fascinated, at the remote, waxen stiffness of the little boy she had known quite well. The mother seemed consoled by the visit and thanked them for coming, but Esther trembled when they left, and Betty was surprised at the impression that had been made upon her. The cook met them when they got home and kissed Esther and told her she was a dear child, and Esther felt that she had distinguished herself.

Rhoda was in her mother's room and stayed there till tea time. Her eyes were very large when she came downstairs, and Betty looked at her with solemn disapproval. Rhoda whispered—

"Tell me about it, Esther. I don't mind hearing about it."

"I suppose it's right to see dead people," said Esther, gasping a little, "and their relations seem to want you to. But I hope no one will ever die at Wistons; it doesn't seem possible, and I don't think I could bear it."

"I think mamma is sorry now that she didn't go and see Freddy: Betty is to tell her all about it after tea. I think mamma likes dead people, and I'm quite sure that Betty is really fond of them."

Esther went reluctantly to bed, and when Betty left her and was shutting the door she screamed out—

"Leave it open, please leave it open; oh, Betty dear, I can't bear to think of Freddy lying there looking so strange."

Betty came back to the bed and kissed her again and said—

"But it has to be, Miss Esther dear; we all come to that, it's what we're here for."

"Is it?" said Esther, clutching Betty's hand.

"Yes; and just think how good it ought to make us."

"Betty, is Freddy in heaven, really in heaven this very minute?"

"We must hope so."

"I'm sure he wasn't wicked," said Esther, with

a shaking voice. "I should like to be sure he was in heaven. I shouldn't mind so much then about his looking so different. Betty, dear, I will try and be good always; but need I see any one else that is dead? I mean for a long time? I will if you wish it very much, but I don't think I shall ever like it, at least not until I'm grown up."

"Try and go to sleep, dear; say some of your hymns."

Esther reluctantly let go of Betty's hand, and when she was gone lay staring at the friendly light that shone through the half-open door. She said her hymns and "Our Father," but she couldn't help thinking of Freddy and how cold he felt when she touched him in obedience to Betty, who had said, "You remember people dead and not living unless you touch them."

But to-night, however much she tried, Esther could not remember the living Freddy, though she recollected the long Sussex drawl with which he had answered "Ya-as, miss," the last time she met him coming to the house with a tin can for milk. She thought of the deep grave that was dug ready for him, and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth that her crying might not be heard. Just then, under the bed, Topsy's tail tapped cheerfully upon the boards. Esther forgot Freddy in an in-

stant, and hung over the side of the bed till her head nearly touched the floor.

"Oh, you darling dog, come here," she whispered, "come here."

Topsy crawled out and turned over on her back with her four paws in the air. It was one of Betty's laws that Topsy should not go upstairs. "I pity the poor dumb creatures and they must be looked after, but I hold with keeping them in their places," she used to say. Topsy understood, and often crept upstairs to Esther's room and lay under the bed till Betty had gone away and she could safely tap her tail upon the floor and begin a conversation. To-night she had waited a little longer, not understanding why the door was left open. Esther whispered, "Jump up, Topsy, jump up."

Topsy pretended she was a wild dog in the grass, and scratched the bed-clothes and turned round and round before she lay down. Esther, with a great sigh of relief, said—

"Oh, Topsy, dearest, how glad I am you're here!" and forgot her hymns and went to sleep at once.

The next morning Esther proposed to Rhoda that they should read the Bible oftener. Then began the religious revival that pleased Betty at first but that ended by bewildering her.

CHAPTER VII

One day in the middle of spring, Esther was sitting in the flickering shade of the big apple-tree and Rhoda was up in its branches. They were both reading the Bible and, though it would have been impossible for her to explain why, Betty felt the reading to be unseasonable. Rhoda had dropped her book and said, as she stretched downwards to take it from Esther—

"I mean to read the whole of the Bible up here."

"Well, I don't hold with your reading it up there," said Betty, standing in the nursery doorway; "come down, Miss Rhoda, and sit in your own little chair at the table with your back to the window, so as your mind won't be distracted from the Word of God."

"No, Betty, my mind's never distracted, but I don't like reading indoors except when it's raining. Besides, the Chosen People were nearly always out of doors."

Betty was poor at an argument and accustomed

to defeat in action, so she stepped back into the nursery, one window of which was so close to the apple-tree that at night, when it was shut and the wind blew, the boughs brushed against it; the sound was so familiar that to Betty and the children it seemed a tangible part of Wistons. Esther sat very still, and was glad that Betty did not call her to come in. She was so sympathetic that she generally obeyed because it pained her more to hurt Betty's feelings than to be herself disappointed. Besides, she was never quite sure that she was in the right, whereas Rhoda was always certain that she was, and had a way of ignoring that her disobedience could cause a coolness between herself and Betty.

"Betty," cried Rhoda from the tree, "you know your Bible very well, don't you?"

Betty was cautious and did not answer.

"Betty, please tell me what are wave-offerings and heave-offerings, and why don't we offer them now to the Lord? Perhaps it's making Him very angry not to have them."

"Oh, Miss Rhoda," said Betty, coming to the open door, "it's quite dreadful the way you look for meanings. What the Lord intends us to understand He's written clear, and what we're not to know He's written so as we shouldn't understand

it. Mr. Milldown says it's looking for meanings in the Bible as have made the world so wicked."

"But, Betty, it's not my fault. I can't help thinking about the meanings, and I'm sure that sacrifices are most important."

"Well, some day, Miss Rhoda, I hope you'll be wiser and read the Word of God in a different spirit. It's not for us poor, blind creatures to find out what's hidden. Now it's enough for me," said Betty, with a sweet, expectant look, "that 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters': that needs no explaining."

"But Betty," began Rhoda, and stopped short, for Esther jumped up and pulled her frock so roughly that she had to slide and scramble down the tree to avoid falling to the ground.

"How can you be so horrid, you'll make Betty cry! Go away!"

"I was going away," said Rhoda, with dignity shaking her skirts straight again, and walking off.

"Betty," said Esther, kissing her, "I love 'the Lord is my Shepherd,' I think it's beautiful; it reminds me of the fields beyond the brook. Hear me say it indoors; I think I know it perfectly."

"I'm afraid I'm hardly in the proper state of mind; Miss Rhoda does worry me so with ques-

tions. All this morning it was nothing but skeletons. It's ever since she was in the churchyard while they were digging old Mrs. Tribeses' grave and threw up all them skulls and bones with the earth. She seems to think there's skeletons underground everywhere, and she's most anxious about the souls of the very oldest skeletons as ever was. She argued till my head ached, and I was quite glad when she went upstairs to speak about it to your mamma. I do wish Miss Rhoda would go for nice quiet walks."

Rhoda walked across the lawn and through the kitchen garden till she came to the tool-house; within it she saw the latest litter of blind kittens, left temporarily alone by their tabby mother. "I'm surprised Madgwick hasn't drowned them all but one," she mused, "I suppose he has forgotten them."

Suddenly a thought struck her, and she took five of the six and placed them in a row outside on the hard path. There were some bricks close by, she picked up one and holding it above her head and saying in a loud voice, "This is a heave-offering unto the Lord God of Israel," she flung it down upon the first kitten. Pleased with the precision of her aim she stooped and peeped beneath the brick;

what she saw made her feel sick, and she turned away and walked slowly back towards the house. On the lawn she met Esther coming to find her and make friends.

"Esther," exclaimed Rhoda, seizing her hand, "do you think that God really liked the sacrifices and the blood?"

"Yes, of course He did," answered Esther piously.

"Well, I don't believe it," said Rhoda firmly, "at least not the blood—it's horrid."

Esther clutched her shoulder and looked at her. "What have you been doing?"

"You leave me alone," said Rhoda, shaking herself free.

"I shall go and find out," said Esther, running off, and Rhoda stood still and watched her. In a few moments Esther ran back and caught hold of Rhoda and slapped and shook her.

"You deserve to go to hell! How could you do it?"

Rhoda struggled and screamed; Topsy raced round in great circles, barking.

"What is all this? Betty, take them away and put them to bed!" said their father looking out of his window and then shutting it. Betty ran to them and tried to quiet them. "Hush, hush!" she

said, "your mamma will hear." As she spoke Bella rushed out of the house. Esther got out of her way, it was upon Rhoda that she sprang.

"How dare you! No one would think you had been christened in your parish church!"

She dragged Rhoda by one arm indoors and upstairs; the child was quite calm and intent on keeping her shoulder and elbow from being dislocated and her head from bumping on each step. Her mother swung her into her bedroom and let go of her, and Rhoda got up and shook her clothes into order and looked at her arm and pulled down her sleeve. Mrs. Woolvenhurst was out of breath with excitement, she dropped on to the sofa exclaiming—

"I don't believe you say your prayers properly, it's very wrong of Betty not to see to it!" She sat there panting and staring at Rhoda, who stood in front of her and stared back with solemn, imperturbable, dark eyes till Bella got up and took the Bible from the bookshelf. It was full of bookmarkers that Betty had induced the little girls to work. Bella turned over the pages, but her energy was failing her, and she began to forget what had happened. She shut the book and gave it to Rhoda, saying—

"Well, be good and learn some verses."

By and by when she looked away out of the window and sighed and put her hand to the back of her head, Rhoda softly replaced the Bible on the shelf and left the room on tiptoe and ran noiselessly down the stairs. She went back to the spot where she had left the kittens, but they were gone and the path was newly raked and sprinkled with fresh gravel. She peeped into the tool-shed and saw the cat quite happy with one kitten.

"It's quite the prettiest of the lot," Rhoda said to herself. She avoided going where Betty might see her, and ran along the grass path in the woods and across the sandy cart-track to the brook. She looked around to see that no one else was in sight before she sat down with her back against a tree and sang "A lake and a fairy boat" softly to herself. Two swans came swimming down the stream towards her, they held their bills down and curved their necks; she stopped singing and sat motionless looking at them. She liked creatures that lived a free life: she never wanted to pet them or take care of them. The swans swam by, watching her with sidelong, sinister looks. The quaint water-rats came out of their holes in the bank and ran about, and stayed still to listen, and flopped into the water and bustled home again. With ears set back a startled hare came springing past and swam

the brook and disappeared into the copse beyond. The small, wild life of English wood and water was all around her, she loved to be amidst it. She leaned against the tree trunk and slipped down till she lay flat upon the ground and could look up and see the patches of blue sky resting on the fir tops. A squirrel on a branch high up caught sight of her, and in surprise dropped the pine-twig he was holding: it fell close to her and she caught it and pretended to nibble it.

"Ah, Mr. Squirrel, I will eat it all!"

The small, indignant thing of fur and pointed ears and bright eyes scolded and remonstrated. Rhoda jumped up and left the twig upon the ground and stood back to see him run down the tree and snatch it, and run up again and sit with bushy tail triumphant, chattering scornfully down at her. "Oh you silly! how clever you think yourself!" she cried up to him. She talked aloud in the secure consciousness of solitude.

"If only I could see the fairies! but I don't believe I ever shall. I have prayed to see them so often, and in church too. I know exactly what they look like; they shine, they wear clothes like dragon-flies, their eyes are like jewels. I'm fonder of them than of the angels, really. I don't want to see the angels, at least not very much; and I've

made up my mind that I won't pray to see them until I've seen at least one fairy."

Rhoda looked up at the blue as she said this; she was hoping that God would take the hint and strike a bargain and let her see a fairy. She stood still for a whole minute, but nothing happened. She sighed and looked down the stream to see if the swans were swimming back, but they were not. She turned away towards the heart of the woods and went a little out of her way to visit a big ant-heap; she stirred the emmets up with a stick she had left there last time and stamped on a few of them just to see how well they ran off afterwards. She filled her pinafore with old, dry pine-cones and slipped upon the scented fir needles. When she reached the big field she stopped a moment to watch a hedgehog hurry along a furrow. Rhoda liked him very much, he looked so queer a little fellow intent upon his own affairs. The gate at the end of the field was never locked, but Rhoda climbed it and sat on the top with her heels caught in the rails. A nightingale near by in a nut-bush was practising his song for that night's concert, taking one passage over and over again. Rhoda clasped her hands in a sort of rapture; the fir-cones fell out of her pinafore, the bird flew into a neighbouring copse and was silent. The sky was

blue and white, the leaves were tender green; the black sow was grunting homewards with her ten black satin children squealing around her. Rhoda looked at them, and at the trees, and at the sky. "How beautiful and fair is spring!" she said affectedly, waving her hand around. Her feet slipped and she nearly fell; she saved herself by jumping down and swung for a moment on the gate before she ran home by the lane that skirted the farm and house and the lawn and orchard beyond. She had completely forgotten all that had happened earlier in the day and ran into the nursery with a radiant face. Betty looked at her.

"Well, you have made your nice clean pinafore in a mess!"

"Oh, I picked up some fir-cones for mamma's fire and left them by the gate. Poor mamma! I must go back and fetch them."

"Then take this basket with you," said Betty.

Esther ran along the lane where it turned to the right and ended at the Common. She dashed through the gate, which banged behind her, and followed the cart-track a little further before she plunged knee-deep through the heather towards the ridge which runs along Dunton Common, so high above the village that you look over it to Dunton

Down scarred with chalk pits partially grown over with the healing turf. Esther's eyes were fixed upon the tumuli that, looking like little extinct volcanoes, broke the line of ridge against the sky. Both had been opened before the memory of man, and one had been lowered; the other stood out distinctly, a landmark far and near. Up the side of it she ran and down into the rifled grave that was deep enough to hide her from sight had any one ever passed that way. She flung herself full length against the bank, her face upon her arms, and sobbed. Topsy, just above her, poked her nose into her hair and nibbled gently at one ear. But Esther lay there so long that Topsy grew tired of waiting unnoticed and, in a sort of parenthesis, went off and had a futile rabbit hunt by herself. When she returned and rushed down the bank with short, impatient barks Esther sat up and talked aloud—

"I forgave her last Sunday for kicking you; she knows that I have never kicked you, it would be too insulting, and that no one but me is allowed to beat you." Topsy grew sentimental and held out a paw, and Esther kissed the top of her head. "And then she goes and does a dreadful thing and kills a kitten with a brick."

Here Topsy snapped at a butterfly and Esther

dried her eyes and slapped Topsy, and said in a slightly irritable voice—

"You mustn't eat butterflies, my dearest, I've told you so before. Of course," she mused after a short silence, "if Rhoda hadn't killed the kitten with a brick, Madgwick would have drowned it; he says we can't keep hundreds of cats about the place; I wonder which would have hurt it most? And then the dreadful irreligion of sacrificing a kitten to God, a thing no one never thought of doing before! Yes, Rhoda was very wicked, but all the same, I suppose, oh dear, oh dear," and she cried again, "I suppose it was very wicked of me to beat her."

As she spoke Esther pointed with her finger to the opposite bank in which was stuck a row of irregularly shaped flints, white and unbroken. "One, two, three, four," she counted, "four sins, not one of them atoned for. Rhoda is better than me, she has been punished; Rhoda is always punished more oftener than me."

Esther cried again and looked at the flints through her tears; "I mustn't pull one out, and I must put another in," she said, "the biggest I can find."

She turned over some stones that lay at her feet and chose the largest and stuck it in the bank with

the others. She shook the sand out of her frock and scrambled up and seated herself on the edge of the tumulus, looking southward towards the Downs—

"I'm sure they are just like the Mountains of the Messengers. If I tried to be very good I wonder whether the Messengers would come here to me? Betty thinks they won't never come again till the end of the world, but perhaps they might."

Esther shut her eyes, and clasped her arms around her knees and hid her face upon them and prayed that God would send His Messengers to her. If they came she knew she never could be naughty any more. When she had prayed she stood up with her eyes still closed and stretched out her arms towards the hills. But when she looked again the familiar scene met her sight unchanged, though it seemed to her that the gorse around her and below was more golden than before—

"Perhaps that is a sign," she said choking back the disappointment, "I do think it must look something like the floor of the New Jerusalem. But I should like the sign to be more clearer."

Topsy was impatient, and Esther only stopped to look down and count the flints again before she started to walk slowly home. At the gate into the

big field Rhoda was picking up the scattered fir-cones and she stopped to help her—

"Rhoda, I am sorry I beat you; but it was a very dreadful thing you did."

Rhoda looked at her with the frankest expression—

"I promise you I will never do it again—no, not even if God was to tell me to; at least I don't think I would. And, Esther, the path has been cleaned up and they've kept the prettiest kitten for the old cat."

Esther did not think that Rhoda was in a proper spirit of humiliation and repentance, but she remembered the five stones in the bank and tried not to judge her. They filled the basket with the fir-cones and hand in hand walked along the lane towards the house. Their father was at the garden gate; he watched them as they came towards him feeling almost a shock of surprise at their beauty. It was the first time he had noticed it. Some unusual impulse made him put a hand on the shoulder of each child and smile down at them and say—

"And where have my little nut-brown maids just come from?"

At this unexpected display of interest in them Rhoda was too much astonished to answer, but Esther, with her cheeks dyed crimson, looked up

into his face and said shyly, "We met at the gate up there."

George's interest in them was a passing one; the children stood still a moment looking at him, and then went indoors to Betty.

CHAPTER VIII

It was soon after this that Betty made the supreme effort of her life and suggested to George that the children should have a governess. In quick succession they had three. With the exception of Esther every one at Wistons was against them from the first. Mrs. Woolvenhurst stayed in her room and refused to see them. George had dropped into set habits, and at meals disliked the presence of a stranger. Betty was inordinately jealous, and Rhoda had decided beforehand that she should hate them. Esther, torn between pity for the newcomer and the sense of isolation in being her only champion, suffered so much from the force of contending feelings that she spent a great deal of time crying within the tumulus and, subsequently, in disgrace for running away from lessons.

When the ladies packed their boxes and drove away, Esther surprised them by weeping: they did not know that the tears flowed from pity for them, not from regret at their departure. She gave to each a hard little bunch of flowers, saying—

"Please take these, and thank you very much, and I hope we shall meet again."

Meanwhile, George had said goodbye at the preceding meal; Rhoda was in hiding; Bella watched them drive away from behind the white window curtains in her room. Whatever their grievances might be they had no sympathy from Betty. "I hate new faces," was the formula with which she dismissed them into that unknown region to which the railway engine whistled them back. But though she triumphed in their failure, Betty dreaded the alternative of school. One day she sat sewing, her lips pursed up and her brow contracted in a frown; she suddenly laid down her work and took off her glasses, displacing as usual two locks of smooth hair and mechanically putting up her hands to restore each to its right position behind her ears.

"There now!" she exclaimed aloud, "we might all have been saved a deal of trouble if only I'd thought of it before." She glanced at the clock and went at once to the library; George looked up from his book as she entered. Alone with Betty he often felt like a little boy again, and he fixed his eyes on her inquiringly. Betty was quick to recognise this disposition on his part and to turn it to advantage. The old, vindictive expression came into her delicate, pale face and large, short-sighted eyes as she began: "I've come to tell you what you ought to do, Master George; not write to Lon-

don for more of them to be sent down to upset every one, but teach Miss Esther and Miss Rhoda yourself. I suppose they needn't know everything, but whatever is the use of all your learning if you can't tell them what they have to know as well as they old governesses as cost so much and worry our lives out? One would think they weren't your daughters at all, you take so little notice of them, and them, as everybody knows, the most beautiful children to be seen anywhere around. I said nothing as long as I thought the governesses might do, but it's time I spoke now, though I am only a servant. As long as I could learn them myself I was pleased enough to do it: but it's not to be thought of as they are to be in any way beneath other gentlemen's children in their educations, and I don't deceive myself by thinking as I can finish them."

Many people cry a little when they speak about themselves and here Betty's chin began to quiver; but there was something else she had to say, and she checked her tears and continued: "And it's right I should also say as I can't tell the reason why our children are never to be taken round to houses to see other young ladies and make friends with them. I hear of children's parties, but not of our children being asked to them."

Betty stopped, and George said meekly—

"But, Betty, I'm very much obliged to you for speaking to me; of course, I ought to have thought of it myself; I should like nothing better than to teach them, it will be a great interest, I will begin to-morrow."

He paused, and looked at her with the helpless expression that Betty and his mother had been so familiar with when he was a boy.

"I will go and see people, and take the children with me if you like; but I don't think anybody wants us very much—you see——"

He paused again; Betty waited for a moment but he remained silent, and she left the room, saying, in her usual respectful voice, "Then to-morrow morning at ten, sir, when you've done with Madgwick."

George surprised the little girls by taking them to call at one or two houses: the people in the houses were surprised too. Esther and Rhoda stood close to their father during the visits and held aloof from the stranger children, the two groups staring silently at each other with a kind of instinctive racial dislike. George found conversation difficult with the comfortable, dull people whom he knew, who neither cared for farming nor for books. He walked home silent and depressed.

"Poor papa," said Esther as Betty took her

things off after the last attempt to make friends in Philistia.

"Why do you say 'poor papa'?" asked Rhoda.

"Oh, I don't know," said Esther.

"Betty," exclaimed Rhoda, "why must we go and see horrid little girls we don't like? I don't want them to come here; if they do come, I shall run away and hide till they are gone. I wouldn't show them the brook and the Common not for nothing at all!"

The attempt at social intercourse was a failure, but the lessons were a success. George was interested and amused, and made the acquaintance of his children from without; he never understood what is meant by character or guessed that action is dependent on it: any child could be good or naughty: any man could do right or wrong.

Esther and Rhoda learnt all he taught them easily and quickly, and walked about with books of poetry and history in their hands and read these instead of fairy stories and the Bible. They read everything that interested them, skipping the dull pages. Historical personages, characters in fiction, kings and queens, painters and poets, soldiers and statesmen and the great adventurers were their familiar friends. What new, dazzling light was thrown on life by their acquaintance with them!

They discussed, with heat, the concerns of men and women dead a hundred, a thousand years ago. Their heads were filled with delightful and inaccurate information. They confidently expected that when they were grown up—how impatient they sometimes felt of the intervening years—they would meet the wonderful living people who had replaced the wonderful dead! The great poets and painters and statesmen whose brilliant conversation was always recorded by admiring friends. Men, who though they might sometimes be wicked, never could be dull, never could misunderstand, who would answer every question and explain everything one wished to know. They might feel shy and awkward with the people their father took them to see but never with Socrates and Sir Walter Raleigh and Doctor Johnson! How delightful, too, it would be when the Queen, sitting on her throne with her crown upon her head and her sceptre in her hand, sent for them, and the Court looked on while they advanced up long halls with the exhilarating consciousness that all eyes were on them. Then the Queen would hold out her hand and tell them she was glad that they had come.

The religious question held them for awhile in painful agitation. In fine confusion of mind Rhoda decided that they were, they must be, atheists.

Esther was reluctant, and prayed for faith, and cried and wondered what Betty would say, and hoped she would never find out. But Rhoda insisted, and they talked about it when they were alone together by the brook or in remote parts of the woods, or on the edge of the tumulus facing the Downs.

Esther was anxious that their change of opinion should never become known to Betty; Rhoda thought that some day they might tell her and Mr. Milldown. Esther, guessing that martyrdom had but little charm for Rhoda, tried by diplomacy instead of argument to save Betty's peace of mind. "Are you quite sure that atheists are not hanged?" she asked. As Rhoda was not quite sure they decided that it would be inexpedient to make public their opinions, and Esther rejoiced that Betty's feelings would thus be spared.

"If we did tell Betty she would shut herself up in the nursery and cry like anything for days and days as she did when grandmamma died," said Rhoda, with her large eyes opened to their widest extent, "and just suppose if Mr. Milldown was to preach a sermon about us? Betty says she can remember once when he preached a sermon against a man who fired a hayrick, and that he all but named him from the pulpit. Betty says it was most awful, you could have heard a pin drop. She's not sure

that it was right because, of course, in the pulpit a clergyman is not supposed to remember anything or anybody; Betty doesn't think he ought to take any notice even if several of the congregation were to be carried out dead before his eyes! But when we don't go to church any more how surprised Mr. Milldown will be! especially if we never tell him the reason why."

Esther did not answer; she pulled a dirty piece of paper out of her pocket and smoothed it and changed the conversation by reading the pencilled scrawl again with Rhoda—

"Honord Mis,—i has they ferts at farmr ducks a fridai moarng from your Humbl servnt jack tribe."

"I told papa we want a holiday to-morrow; he never asked me why."

"He never does," said Rhoda, "so different from those governesses. Only Betty is sure to guess."

"We must get away without her seeing us."

The next morning Esther put on her thick boots before she went downstairs and kept them out of Betty's sight. Nothing was said of the holiday, and after breakfast Esther took Topsy to the bottom of the garden and waited there within the wood, just out of sight, for Rhoda to join her.

Rhoda was sitting on the floor in her bedroom buttoning her boots when Betty discovered her.

"You don't want those boots on now, you have to come in at nine and prepare your lessons," she said, snatching away the button-hook. Rhoda used her fingers, leaving every other button unfastened.

"Miss Rhoda, I can guess what you're up to, but you're too big for rat hunts. Oh dear, what ever can your papa be thinking of to let you go off with the men and their dreadful ferrets! I wonder you're not afraid of them like young ladies should be. And the language you and Miss Esther have been using lately! well, it's not to be believed!"

"We're obliged to swear sometimes," said Rhoda with dignity.

"How dreadfully wicked of you to say such a thing! You learn bad words from the men!"

"We don't; they say 'jiggered,' and we say 'damn,' like they do in books."

"Which you wouldn't waste your time with if you were fond of your needle. And then to say you're obliged!"

"Well, if we're not exactly obliged, we can't help it."

"Miss Rhoda, I shall go and speak to your papa!"

"Betty, you leave me alone! I shall do what I like. It would be most unfair if I didn't go to the rat hunts. Esther is pretty good, but Madgwick

says no one in the parish handles the ferrets as well as I do."

"Well, I wouldn't be so easily deceived by his flattery if I was you, Miss Rhoda."

"I suppose you call it flattery when he says I ought to have been a boy, though every one knows it's a shame I wasn't."

"No," cried Betty scornfully; "no one never heard me deny that!"

She was white with the sense of impotence and said no more, but opened a drawer and began to rearrange its contents. Before starting Rhoda flung an arm round her and kissed her.

"Oh, you silly little Betty; papa gave us a holiday, and we shall come home all right—we always do."

Betty, from the window, watched her run across the lawn. Madgwick also was going to Farmer Duck's; as he walked along the sunken lane his head bobbed up and down, level with the flower-beds. Esther ran out of the wood and joined them: Topsy and Effie, with sham snarls, met and rolled each other over in the sand.

"And to think of Miss Esther's waiting, down there! why, she must have put on her thick boots already before breakfast! and me never to notice it!"

One Sunday, Rhoda was up in the apple-tree talking to Betty. Esther, on the lawn, felt that she should end by giving in to Betty, but must, on principle, hold out a little longer.

"I shall not go to church, Betty; my conscience will not allow me."

"Be quiet, Rhoda," said Esther, looking anxiously at Betty, who was quivering with bewildered vexation.

"I won't waste words on you, Miss Rhoda, your frame of mind is too dreadful; I shall pray for you."

Rhoda, quite unmoved, ate some toffee that was in a sticky piece of paper. Esther, glancing up at her mother's window, said—

"If mamma finds out she will be very angry: she will say we must be confirmed; her mind's dwelling on confirmation."

"Mamma's all right; I went to see her just now. She was reading 'Macbeth' most beautifully. She has forgotten that it is Sunday; the prayer-book was on the shelf."

Betty had transferred her attention from Rhoda to Esther.

"Come, Miss Esther, you're the oldest; it's only right as you should behave best."

"But, Betty, I don't want to go to church either; I've been so often."

"And that's all the more reason for continuing to go. Don't listen to Miss Rhoda's false reasoning; it would be more becoming to set her an example."

Esther retreated a few yards; if Betty were angry she would certainly not give in, but would stay at home too. Experience prompted Betty to change her tactics: she took out her handkerchief and held it in her hand.

"I did think, Miss Esther, you would be kinder than to upset me so. I've had threatenings of neuralgia, and I shouldn't be surprised if I were to be in bed all day to-morrow." Betty never had been in bed all day in her life; it was a tragic possibility with which she occasionally threatened them, and that caused even Rhoda to feel uneasy. Esther walked slowly towards the house.

"Well, Betty dear, perhaps I will come. Just go in and put on your things and let me speak to Rhoda for a minute; I won't quite promise, you know."

"Of course it's cowardly of you," said Rhoda dispassionately, looking down and speaking to her sister; "it's distinctly wanting in the moral courage that is expected of an atheist."

"I don't agree with you; it isn't as if we had really settled anything."

"I call it mean to say that just because it suits you to excuse yourself."

"But you said so too yesterday."

"What did I say?"

"Why, that we might as well put it off till we were grown up."

"Well, I don't mind doing that; but even then I don't think we ought to go to church."

Esther reflected before she said—

"Rhoda, do you think it would be possible to make Betty an atheist too?"

"No, I do not. I think Betty has the kind of mind that Shelley himself would have found it impossible to influence."

"It would be much more comfortable if Betty agreed with us," said Esther, "and you know, Rhoda, I shall always, always love Jesus Christ. I should like to have followed His footsteps in Palestine, and even if I had found out that He was not the Son of God I never would have told any one."

"I don't want to influence you," said Rhoda gloomily, "and I think we ought to inquire into everything before we abandon the religion of our forefathers. But all the same, I shall not go to church to-day."

"Won't you really? just this once more?"

"No; I saw from the beginning that you had made up your mind to go, but I shall stay at home and read about Julian the Apostate again in Gib-

bon. He is my favourite emperor. Afterwards I shall take Topsy for a walk."

Betty had her bonnet on and was looking through the window with Esther's hat in her hand.

"Betty dear, I'm going; I'm going to please you, but I would rather stay at home."

"That's a sad spirit in which to enter the house of God," said Betty; "you must pray going along that your heart may be softened. I can't understand how it is that you don't like going to church. If you were boys, now! Most boys has to be bad, but girls are bound to be good, and it's the same all through life."

In the lane they passed Madgwick, and Esther stood still and looked up in his face, and said in tremulous tones—

"Oh, Madgwick, I do wish I could stay at home too, but I'm going to church."

Madgwick nodded and answered—

"Well, I've nothing to say agin that. You'll soon be a young lady, and young ladies has to do what they don't like."

Esther was surprised; she had expected sympathy from Madgwick, and tears came into her eyes as she walked along by Betty's side.

CHAPTER IX

One winter night when Rhoda and Esther were fourteen and fifteen years old, George lay dying. He had caught cold a month ago and had grown weak unresistingly. At first the doctor thought lightly of his case, but Betty looked at the sick man with eyes made keen by affection and responsibility, and when the doctor came again, at the sight of his startled gravity Betty clutched her gown and said to herself, "There! I knew it was so."

George also knew it and did not seem to care. The doctor said there was a chance for him if he would rouse himself. But George seemed content to lie still and let the chance go by. He asked to have his bed moved into the library, and Betty made the room snug with screens and curtains. There was a table for the physic bottles, and the lamp from which the shaded light fell only on Betty seated upright in a low chair. She had just been upstairs with Mrs. Woolvenhurst, and had left her sitting up in bed reading aloud to Rhoda, who crouched upon the hearthrug staring at the fire. Esther had followed Betty from the room to stop her on the landing and look at her with questioning eyes.

"Mayn't I sit up with you to-night?" she asked.

Betty reflected for a moment.

"No, better not: go to bed and get Miss Rhoda to go too. If there should be a change I will come and call you, dear."

"A change? Papa is not going to die? He couldn't die! Oh, Betty!"

"Your poor papa's very ill. I'm not going to give up hope, but we must be prepared for the worst if it's God's will."

"I can't be prepared. I'm not prepared; he mustn't die. I want him to love me. We've had a few such beautiful times together lately! He's just beginning to want me with him. No, Betty, he isn't going to die; none of us can die, none of us in this house, it isn't possible!"

Betty was in no mood for controversy. She said, "The doctor has given me every direction; it's best for your papa as there should be only one person in the room, the quiet's so important. You both go to sleep and be fresh in the morning when I have to rest."

Esther turned silently away, and Betty went back to the big chair by the table to sit with her hands in her lap, waiting. George dozed sometimes and then lay with his eyes half open, looking at Betty's face shining in the lamplight. Every now and then

he spoke: "Betty, things are worrying me; I'm trying to remember when my father died."

"It was long ago; don't you be thinking about that to-night."

There was the old authority in her voice, and George shut his eyes and slept again. Presently he opened them.

"Betty, I ought to have left you and Madgwick provided for in my will."

"Whatever do Madgwick and I want providing for more than we are? I often think as Wistons, outside and in, belongs more to him and me than to any one else."

"Very well, Betty," said George drowsily. The sound of her voice expressing frank dissent at once soothed him back into the submissiveness of childhood. He lay there breathing quietly for a long time, and then he suddenly spoke again.

"Betty, sometimes I feel as if I had never begun to live. Once for a few weeks I thought I had, but it was all a mistake, Betty, a mistake."

His head moved uneasily on the pillow, and Betty came and stood by him.

"Master George," she said, and the dying man looked attentively at her, "we've just got to accept everything and not grow wicked under it. I'm only an ignorant servant, but I see what life is: first we

struggle against it, and then we put up with it, and then we must wait quiet like until it's over; it's just that, that and 'the peace of God which passeth all understanding.'" Betty gave him some food and arranged his pillows, and went back to her chair and sat watching him as before. As the night wore on George lay so still that Betty came and stood over him for a few moments and listened to his faint breathing and then softly left the room.

All the house was silent; a lamp had been left burning on the table in the kitchen where the fire glowed red in the grate, the cat on the hearthrug raised its head and mewed interrogatively as Betty passed. She opened the back door; the cold night air blew on her as she paused for a moment on the threshold. What dim, inarticulate protest against life and death made Betty look up at the frosty skies and shake her head at a myriad stars? She stepped out into the light, brilliant night, and went along the path to the stables, here and there flicking aside with her foot a chip that had been dropped. There was a light in the harness-room; she lifted the latch and found herself in the warm atmosphere that smelt of leather and polish.

Madgwick, like his fathers before him, could not read in books, and so, as they would have done, he

sat looking in the fire and thinking his thoughts that were of horses and cattle, of crops and woodlands, of hard bargains made or missed. When Betty entered he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stood up.

"I be ready," he said.

"It won't be much longer now," Betty answered; "I shan't call the poor children till the last. Do you think as you ought to fetch Mr. Milldown? he hasn't asked for him."

"Master George han't never wronged no one; there be no call to terrify un now," said Madgwick doggedly.

Betty compromised with her conscience. "He was here a few hours ago, and said for certain he'd look in early."

In the kitchen they found Esther holding the cat in her arms. Betty, in surprise, said, "Haven't you been to bed yet? it's past three o'clock."

"Oh, yes, I went to bed and slept, but then I woke and couldn't sleep again."

She shivered, and Betty said—

"You've caught cold!"

"No, I've not caught cold, but I can't help shaking. I think I'm frightened. Oh, Betty, I opened the window and leaned out; it was all quite bright and still upon the lawn, only the little noises in the

woods were more curious than ever, and something seemed to be there that was never there before. I ran downstairs, but Betty, all the house is waiting as if it was expecting some one; every room is awake and listening."

Esther could not control her voice; she ended with a faint scream and hid her face against the cat.

"Why, I never heard of Death coming so as you could see him, did you, Madgwick?"

"I've heerd tell o' queer things," Madgwick answered grimly.

"Is Miss Rhoda up too?" asked Betty.

"No, I listened at her door, but there wasn't a sound. Betty dear, I must stay with you and with papa; I must indeed."

They left the kitchen together. Madgwick stopped in the room next to that in which George lay, and there, as he waited, his thoughts took a fresh start beginning with that day long ago when the little boy was born, and he, a young lad, had been sent on horseback to fetch the doctor.

Esther followed Betty noiselessly into the sick-room where George still slept. She sat back in the shadow, and Betty resumed her old position. Presently George asked anxiously—

"Why has my mother gone away?"

Betty went to him and smoothed the sheet and held his hand. She bent down and kissed him, "Oh, hush, my dear boy; I'm here a-taking care of you."

George looked up at her and laughed softly. That kiss of Betty's charmed thirty years away, and he was a child, and seven years old once more. Faint, tinkling sounds in his ears were the notes of his mother's musical-box, and at the parlour table she sat sewing, in the arm-chair was his father and he was standing between them piecing together the puzzle that represented the story of "Joseph and his brethren." Betty looked from him to Esther, and nodded towards the door, and Esther went out on tip-toe and beckoned Madgwick.

"Master George," said he.

George opened his eyes and stared at him for a moment.

"Why, Madgwick," he answered with a smile, and Madgwick bent his head to listen, "if they carry the hay to-morrow I'm to have a holiday."

Esther knelt and clasped her father's hand.

"Oh, papa, my own papa, say one word to me. I'm Esther, I'm your daughter." But he looked at her without response or recognition, and when he turned his head away Esther loosed her grasp and sank down upon the floor.

George was silent for a long time, and only Madgwick spoke to him again.

"Master George," he said aloud and suddenly, "be you comfortable?"

"Quite comfortable," he answered.

He did not open his eyes or speak again. The three silent watchers round the bed saw a sudden spasm pass across his face; the eyelids and the brow changed. George was dead, and Madgwick turned away and opened wide the window.

Betty sat down and thought a little before she took up life again from a changed standpoint. She thought of the baby in his bath who had laughed and held out his arms to her; she remembered suddenly, what she had so long forgotten, that Laetitia was half afraid the first time she carried him downstairs and out of doors.

"And now 'tis all as if it had never been."

At eight o'clock everything was in solemn order in the library and Betty was ready to knock at Mrs. Woolvenhurst's door, and later, when Bella had had her breakfast and was dressed, Betty told her.

Bella said nothing; she went to the window and stood there looking out. Betty waited. Presently Bella turned and looked at her and waved her hand,

and then Betty went quietly away. Outside the door she stood still and said to herself—

"I pity you too. But we've done our duty by you, and we'll do it still."

For a week Madgwick watched each night beside the dead. It was Betty who arranged what should be done and who settled that no one should be asked to the funeral; not even those of the neighbours who long ago had forgotten the living man, but who paid belated calls upon the dead.

"We've done without them for many a day, and we'll do without them still. Only those shall follow as cared for him," she said.

Just as the coffin was being carried out of the house, Bella seized Rhoda's hand and said that she would not go to the funeral and that she would not be left alone. At the church Mrs. Milldown, with a protecting, motherly movement, drew Esther to her; Esther tightened her hold of Betty's hand, and the three stood and knelt together, with Madgwick close behind them.

Old Mr. Milldown, as he read the service, sobbed with a bewildered feeling that the dead man was really the little boy he had known familiarly, and not the stranger into whom that boy had appeared to merge.

When the service was over and they had come

out of the churchyard leaving George lying there in the grey sand beside the calm, green graves of his father and mother, Madgwick went off by himself into the woods, and was seen no more that day. Mr. and Mrs. Milldown clasped Esther's hands and patted her on the shoulder and cried, and told her to bear up, and said again and again that it did not seem possible it could be true that Robert and Laetitia and George were all gone. Esther trembled and her lips were quivering as she thanked them with her sad eyes fixed on theirs. She and Betty walked home together very silently, but just before they reached Wistons Esther burst into a passion of weeping and said—

"We will always wear black clothes until we die too. Oh, Betty, if he could only have been happy just for a little while before he died! Poor papa! Oh, my poor papa!"

CHAPTER X

Days passed, and weeks and months; George's shadowy presence, that for awhile seemed to linger about his home faded and became confused with his shadowy absence. Occasionally Betty, when she could spare the time, had fits of musing that ended in a few large tears. Bella never spoke to any one of her husband; it seemed as if she had forgotten him altogether. Rhoda looked uneasy if she heard her father spoken of; Esther's remembrance of him grew fainter when Madgwick talked to her of him as if it were a boy that had died, and long ago.

"He wor' a nice, peart little chap, but all'us quiet like, though nothing like so quiet as after they sent un away somewheres nigh agin Lunnon for his eddication. There be summut wrong wi' Lunnon surely, else why be Lunnoners that silly when they comes and settles hereabouts? There bain't a child as can't take 'em in over most anything. Old master wanted to send me up to Lunnon for to see that there Great Exbishun they talked so much about—me and three other chaps as I wor to ha' chose, and

every man jack of us his expenses paid. But I sez, 'No, sir,' I sez, and I sez it firm for me and t'others. Old master was up at me, and 'Why not, Madgwick?' he sez. 'Becos I had the luck to be born in Sussex, and more speshully on this side the Downs in Sussex,' I answers un, 'an' I won't be a-tempting Providence myself nor yet the cause o' others tempting un,' I sez. And with that I touches my cap most respectful like and walks off not to hear no more about it. But he shouts after me, he do, 'Why, you blockhead, Lunnon's this side the Downs.' 'That's as may be,' I sez, 'but there be the Downs and here be I,' I sez, and I sez it still."

The life at Wistons changed a little. Bella came down-stairs more often, as if some restraint had been removed. She peeped into the library, but did not go in until one day she saw Esther there placing flowers upon the mantelpiece. Then she entered and looked about inquisitively, as a child might have done. Esther made the room her own, and when she had established herself in it Rhoda came there often too and shared it with her. In the evenings Rhoda went from one room to another as the fancy took her. In her mother's room she would stand at the corner of the fireplace, one foot on the fender and one elbow on the mantelpiece, her chin resting on

her hand, her dark eyes turning from one object to another with scarcely a movement of her head. Sometimes she knelt by her mother's side, and, when Bella had overlooked some possible change of the cards, silently made the move for her. She would stroke her mother's cheek or kiss her hair and say, "My own beautiful mamma."

Rhoda moved in an atmosphere of calm; she came and went like a cat, uninfluenced by the moods or wishes of those around her.

If Esther feared that Betty might feel abandoned, left by herself in the nursery, Rhoda said cheerfully that she was sure she liked it. But Esther called up a vision of Betty alone, with a white face and wistful eyes, and ran off to keep her company there, or made her put away her work-basket and come back with her to the library and sit close to the fire and talk. Betty had discovered a modus vivendi, and when Esther and Rhoda shocked her with some statement or opinion, she smiled incredulously and said she knew they did not mean it. She was thus relieved from the necessity of argument or expressed dissent; she was no longer responsible and critical, she was admiring and appreciative. She and Esther might suddenly be interrupted in the evening by Rhoda dancing towards them with fantastic steps and movements of her own inven-

tion. Advancing, retreating, she danced for Betty, with eyes fixed on the delightful face.

"Oh, Miss Rhoda! whatever will you be doing next?"

Suddenly Rhoda would sit down on the floor at Betty's feet, and untwist her long, black hair and shake it till it covered her face, and so she would remain, motionless, while Esther and Betty alternately read verses first in a chapter of the Old Testament and then in a chapter of the New.

* * * * *

One day, two years after George had died, Esther and Rhoda were together on the terrace-like ground upon which the tumulus was built.

Esther was saying—

"Rhoda, do you often think of papa?"

"Not very often, I didn't when he was alive. Do you?"

"Yes, I couldn't bear him to be forgotten."

"I was always afraid of papa, and so was mamma unless she was very angry with him. I think papa ought to have been fonder of mamma; why wasn't he?"

"I think they didn't suit each other. I used to be afraid of mamma once."

"I never was. I shouldn't have liked any one else for my mother. Just fancy if we had been

Mrs. Milldown's children. She makes me feel quite idiotic, she treats us like babies. You have an artificial smile all the time you talk to her."

Esther laughed—

"But you know we are very fond of Mrs. Milldown, Rhoda."

As they walked homeward they saw a girl standing with a child in her arms close to the earthworks of the British Camp. She held him up high in the air, then, with a swift movement, stooped down and put him on the ground and clapped her hands and ran backwards. Suddenly, as if struck with the delightful wonder of his existence, she burst into peals of laughter and stood still, one hand hanging by her side, the other outstretched pointing at him. The child kicked and crowed, his mother rushed and caught him up and held him huddled in her arms and covered him with kisses.

"Patty Turner oughtn't to have that baby, she isn't married," said Esther.

"She is so fond of him, I've thought I'd like to have a baby ever since I first saw Patty with hers."

"But babies ought to have fathers as well as mothers to take care of them."

"Oh, fathers don't take care of babies, and Patty takes such care of hers. I had a long talk with her about him. She's very angry with his father, she

doesn't love him a bit now. She's glad he has enlisted and gone away to be a soldier, and she hopes he'll never come back. The other girls laugh at her, but Patty says it's as likely as not that they'll have babies too. She doesn't care; she says she's very glad she has her baby, but she doesn't mean to have any more until she is married: only she won't marry the soldier."

Esther reflected.

"I am sorry for their baby," she said; "I am sorry for them all three; I think they must miss one another."

They stopped to look down upon the lower Common and the distant road that crossed it.

"It's like a white ribbon," said Esther.

Rhoda nodded. "And it's wound out and out until it reaches London; some day I'm going there with it."

"When?" asked Esther, surprised.

"I don't know, but I shall go. I shall come back again, of course. Esther, do you mean to stay at Wistons all your life and never see any one else?"

"Oh no. When I am married I shall go away and see everybody."

"But whom shall you marry?"

"I don't know—not anybody I've ever seen."

"Not one of those who follow the hounds, and

when they ride up the lane go so slowly past the garden?"

"No. I stand a little way back from the hedge and look at them, and I say in a whisper, 'No, oh no! not you.'"

"Who are they all?" asked Rhoda, with interest.

"Madgwick knows—at least, he knows those who have land belonging to them; some of them, he says, are lords. I'm sure none of them are heroes or poets. One can tell that at once. Betty is dreadfully vexed when they ride slowly past and stare at me. But I like it, and I've said 'No' to every one of them."

"What shall you say when the real one comes, the one that you want to marry?"

"I shan't say anything; he will speak to me."

"But suppose he's stupid and doesn't know?"

"He will know, he won't be the right one if he doesn't," said Esther with smiling confidence.

Rhoda reflected—

"I suppose nearly every one marries?"

"Yes. But I want to marry the greatest poet or painter; or a great statesman like Charles James Fox. Oh how I wish that Shelley was alive now and that I was Mary Godwin! or that Hamlet was a real person; I do hate Ophelia!"

"I think I won't go to London till you're married: I'm really not in any hurry."

PART II

ROBIN

CHAPTER I

Robin Yaldwyn was breakfasting with his usual exquisite deliberation. The breakfast-table was laid for him in the library in the bay of the big window and he looked out upon a pleasant expanse of lawn and park that all belonged to him. The view beyond was shut out with clearly outlined clumps of stately trees, accurately placed to effect their purpose. In the long window was his writing-table, amply provided with paper and envelopes of many shapes and sizes, with pens and inks, pencils and blotting-paper, with sealing-wax and string, and knives and scissors, all neatly arranged and ready for use.

Robin did everything exquisitely, there was a fine personal stamp upon his smallest action, and he drew up his chair to the table, poured out his tea and buttered his toast in a way that gave distinction to tea and toast and table.

Robin was tall and strongly slim, he had yellow hair and dark-blue eyes well cut and placed; his lips were beautifully shaped, the line of his jaw from ear to chin could not have been better drawn,

there were no blurred outlines, and there was no clumsiness in him. But if clumsiness and tactlessness were latent in any one else, Robin's mere presence seemed to draw out and make apparent these defects, and though he never obtruded his own personality, other men often seemed to lose value by contrast with him. Though his sensitive avoidance of persons who were not in sympathy with him might cause him to sit silent and apart in their society, this never put him at a disadvantage: on the contrary, his silence seemed to imply his superiority to the talkers. People whom Robin liked found in him at first a bright, accentuated reflection of their own feelings and opinions; later he might be to them a bright memory, for there was never any fading away in his intimacies: he obliterated them with new ones. He never quarrelled with his friends nor offended them; they succeeded one another just as this year's leaves replace those that were last year on the same branches.

No one was ever franker than Robin and no one was ever offended by his frankness. He would tell you that you were a fool in a way that seemed to distinguish you from the common herd who were beyond his notice.

No one ever evoked more enthusiasm than

Robin. A brilliant American woman, who had known him a fortnight, when entertaining her admiring English friends with a final catalogue of her emotions, opinions, and experiences—her intelligent interest in all that concerned her own charming personality never flagged—said, "He is a spirit. At night when I stand upon the deck I shall see him coming towards me across the Atlantic rollers. Oh, I shall indeed." She added that she should not miss Europe, she should miss Robin: "When they ask me what I saw in Europe I shall say, 'Robin;' when they ask me what I liked best in Europe, I shall say 'Why, Robin'; when they ask me what I've brought back, I shall just hold up my photographs of Robin."

It was said of Robin that he was hardly an Englishman, certainly not an Italian; he was just Robin. He had lived abroad with his mother and his Italian stepfather until he came of age; then, after three years spent more or less in London, it had occurred to him that he would take possession of his property in Sussex.

He had been at home six weeks occupied in settling in. He had changed his bedroom six times: the last change was to his satisfaction. His attention had been concentrated on his house, he had shown no interest in the estate and no curiosity to

learn the extent of his possessions. The numerous servants, who had quickly taken his measure so far as it concerned themselves, did their work exactly as it pleased him to have it done, and for the rest they pleased themselves. He cared not at all what went on below the orderly surface that met his eyes. "Servants are the enemy," he said; "we can't get on without them, so there they are; but they're liars and thieves, and they hate us. The brave man defies them." Meals must be punctual on the chance of his punctuality; if he stayed away from them he gave no warning, he would not send a message to the house if one of his own men passed him. He was cheerfully interested in all that personally concerned him; his morning toilette completely absorbed him; he enjoyed washing his hands, brushing his hair; it would have pleased him to dress twice for dinner. Yet with all this love of detail there was nothing fussy or finikin about him.

He finished his breakfast and wrote and sealed a couple of letters; then he opened a drawer and took out of it some large sheets of paper. He was writing a book, and though he more often wrote notes and telegrams and addressed envelopes, this morning he worked without interruption till luncheon. He meant to write a famous novel, he said

so very often, " No one but myself knows what the modern novel should be, and so I've got to do it. Of course, there's no hurry. In fact, I do not mean to hurry, it would be against all my ideas: it would simply be absurd."

After luncheon Robin went out. He liked walking, and sometimes started off at random and came back across new country without difficulty or hesitation. To-day he walked along the drive, and when he was outside the lodge gates on the high-road he stopped, and glanced to right and left and swung his stick in momentary indecision before turning to the right. He looked up at the big, balloon-like clouds hung in the blue sky, and down at the dusty road beneath his feet. His quick, accurate glance took note of everybody and of everything. He went down a hill and up the opposite ascent; a girl was coming towards him kicking a pebble before her along the ground. As she kicked the stone, she raised a little cloud of dust around her. It was Patty Turner, who had lost her child a month before, and had cried and sulked ever since. She looked sideways under her eyelashes at Robin when they passed each other. Robin turned and watched her as she went down one hill and up the other, down and up which he had just come. When Patty reached the top and,

stooping, picked up the stone and flung it away, Robin waved his hat and shouted, "Bravo! Bravo!" Patty stopped and looked round, and kissed her hand to him and curtseyed as Robin continued to wave his hat towards her. For a moment he seemed inclined to turn back and run after her, but when Patty kissed both hands and ran away, Robin stood still and laughed a loud, discordant "ha, ha," and waited till she was out of sight.

Robin walked along the high-road until he came to a lane that led off it. It was arched over with trees, and looked like a green tunnel of fresh leaves. He was hot and dusty, and he turned at once into the lane and trod along the grassy margin of the road that led to Wistons, until he reached the gate into the copse at the bottom of the garden.

Esther was standing there; one arm was stretched along the top bar of the gate, and in her fingers, by the long stem, she held a crimson rose; the other elbow rested on the rail, and her chin was in the open palm of her left hand. She was looking up the lane away from Robin; she did not hear his noiseless footsteps.

Robin stood still; as he looked at her a most exquisite expression of appreciation and tenderness overspread his face. There was no sound, but sud-

denly, as if she had been called, Esther turned her head sharply round, and her eyes and his met in a long, direct gaze. As if in a dream she stepped back, her arms dropped to her sides, she drew a deep, tremulous breath, and sighed rather than said, "Yes, yes, ah yes." In a moment Robin had opened the gate and was close to her. He bent forward reverentially, touched the rose in her hand, and said in a low, awestruck voice—

"You brought it here for me?"

"I think I did," she answered in a whisper, and let him take it from her. They stood silent and motionless looking at each other till Robin spoke again.

"Where are you going?"

"I live here."

"Then you were here yesterday, and you will be here to-morrow? Here at the end of the cool, green lane? It is most wonderful."

Instinctively she looked towards the garden, but he exclaimed—

"Stay here, stay here a little longer; afterwards I will go anywhere you like."

Esther sat down on a low bank, there were flowers everywhere, and Robin flung himself full length amongst them, and lay there looking up at her intent, expectant face.

"To think how far I have been before I found you! If we had missed each other!"

Esther's eyes were wide and serious as she whispered, "It was impossible, I was always waiting for you here."

Robin bent his head and kissed the hem of her pink gown.

"I understand so perfectly; it could not have been any other way. And there is everything to say, everything to hear. Where shall we begin? But we will not begin, I want to think of you here and now, and of nothing before and nothing after."

Esther looked upwards and laughed softly: her laughter was recognition of the glory of the summer day; of the fleeting clouds and the abiding blueness overhead; of the green, limpid depths around them, the enamelled floweriness beneath their feet; of the compelling sweetness of their youth.

"It is the most wonderful and most beautiful thing that ever happened; say you think so too!"

"I think so too," she answered, her dark eyes looking down into his blue ones. The expression of intense appreciation of himself and her accentuated itself on Robin's face: his lips parted; his eyes shone with the brilliance of surprised delight.

It was Esther who spoke first, after that lovely pause of realisation.

"I always knew that you were coming: when I saw you standing there I knew that it was you."

"Is that why you said 'yes'?"

She nodded, and remembering the days when she said "no" to the horsemen riding past the garden, she smiled and blushed.

"But I was expecting nothing," said Robin; "that was the marvel of it. I never do expect Perfection: I just receive it; like the Stigmata."

The birds were calling in the branches; Esther bent back her head to look and Robin looked up too.

Suddenly she rose, and Robin sprang to his feet and stood by her.

"I will take you to the brook: it is our brook —mine and Rhoda's. But you don't know who Rhoda is!"

"Hush," said Robin, laying a finger on his lips, "don't tell me anything! Be a fairy princess all to-day."

Robin's appreciation of himself, of her, of the scene that held them was poignant; his emotion almost choked him, he shook with it. Side by side and talking to each other they went along the woodland way. The rakish-looking foxgloves

nodded in the little breeze, the pine needles that they trod on scented the vibrating air, the hum of insect life was in their unheeding ears. When they could see the brook that hurried here and loitered there and chattered all the way, Esther ran and pointed as she said, "That is our own brook: it knows us, it loves us."

"It will know me and love me too," said Robin, running with her. Esther knelt and caught up a handful of water and flung it in his face.

"Oh, you dear brook, you are his too now, his and mine and Rhoda's! You will not forget him on your way to the sea and under the sea, will you?" She stood up, and Robin's face grew grave with hers. "And you must never forget," she said to him, "never, never!"

"How could I?" he murmured, "it is a baptism," and standing side by side they watched the water flow.

Robin turned to her.

"May I hold your hand?" She gave it to him. It lay in his, and he looked at it with delight. His voice was husky as he said, "When I come back to-morrow you will still be here? Or will it all have vanished, the green lane and the gate, the woods and the stream?"

She was smiling as she shook her head.

"Then the spell is on you: you are a princess; you were waiting here until I came for you."

She smiled (some smiles are heavenly messengers) and looked at him, and then she sighed, and her eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"Dearest," he said, "you will still wait here for me: you will wait here until we can be married?"

"Yes," she answered, and Robin bent and softly kissed her lips.

In silence, hand in hand, they walked back to the gate and parted there.

When Esther was alone the ecstasy of peace possessed her: she stood still, looking upwards, smiling, unconscious of time, transfigured in the radiant glory of her happiness. She heard the birds, they sang to her in some clear sphere of joy in which her spirit poised, serene and satisfied. But the sweetness was too sharp, it pierced her heart, and she stood on earth again.

As she walked back she asked herself what she should say to them at home? No, she would say nothing: when they saw him to-morrow they would understand. At night she slept directly her head touched the pillow, but joy awoke her later, and she lay still with open eyes thinking of Robin till the moonlight drew her to the window. She pulled back the curtain and looked out of the open case-

ment. The bland mass of the Downs was one in colour with the fields, the distant woods. The round moon overhead was intent on Wistons. The night-jar was persistent at the edge of the wood; the nightingale made passionate appeal from the copse across the lane.

Esther knelt at the window and looked and listened as she had looked and listened innumerable times. But to-night she saw, as she had never seen before, how suave was the curve and swell of the Downs; to-night the moonlight was palpable — earth and sky were made of it; to-night she understood the nightingale.

Something tall and white came out of the darkness of the trees. Esther watched it emerge from the shade, half expectant of some revelation from another world. For it was a night in which spirits should walk abroad to be welcomed by mortals in tune with supernatural beauty. But this was Rhoda who waved her hand and called softly, "Come out, Esther, come out!"

Rhoda's step was buoyant, her eyes glowed. When Esther was with her on the lawn she laid her hand upon her shoulder.

"Oh, Esther, you cannot think what the woods are like to-night! They're so still, but it's not a bit like the stillness of the house! And when I

whistled very softly the night birds circled round my head; I do love them with their noiseless wings! What are you thinking about? What is it?"

"Now I can tell you," Esther answered, looking upward at the attentive moon. "He came to-day, and, Rhoda, he's more wonderful and more beautiful than it's possible to imagine; you can't believe it till you see him."

"And you knew him directly?"

"It was impossible to doubt; it was certainty to see him, and even before I knew that it was he, he knew that I was I. It is so wonderful, Rhoda, that it frightens me. Oh, I shall be glad when to-morrow comes and you have seen him too. Then it must seem real!"

"Is he a poet?"

Esther reflected.

"I think so; he looks exactly like one."

"Oh, Esther, let us go to sleep at once, so that to-morrow may come directly!"

But Esther lingered. "We always knew—didn't we?—that all the wonderful people are not in books."

"Of course we knew! And I shall go away and find the others; I want to see them all."

CHAPTER II

When Esther awoke in the morning she looked out of the window at the familiar daylight world and listened to the familiar daylight life expressing itself around in the well-known way. Was it indeed the same old friendly world of yesterday? Yes, but with less importance, and with more.

She dressed and smiled to her own reflection in the glass, taking some roses from a vase and holding them up to her dark hair; she imagined Robin's face next hers, and tilted up her chin and laughed.

Downstairs Esther found Robin breakfasting with Rhoda. New people and new circumstances always exhilarated him, and he was in his brightest mood. He had been at Wistons since the dawn, he had spent an hour with Madgwick, he had approached Betty, he and Rhoda were friends. Rhoda's dark eyes dwelt admiringly on his beauty; she responded exquisitely to his delicate familiarity.

On the table, in an old birdcage, was a very young wild rabbit with a broken leg. Robin had found the creature on the lawn; he had set the

bone and bandaged it, and he and Rhoda were poking lettuce leaves between the bars of the cage.

"Just look at its absurd nose!" said he, jumping up as Esther entered.

It was Robin who poured out tea and picked the stalks from the strawberries and gave Topsy Junior cream with her milk.

"Topsy Junior's mother was a genius," said Rhoda, looking at Robin with adoring eyes. She laughed aloud with pure contentment and admiration.

The morning hour, Robin's presence at the early meal, Rhoda's acceptance of him, made Esther's eyes sparkle with happiness; the mystery, the poignancy, the tears of yesterday were scarcely to be believed in to-day. This was a daylight world of bright realities that every one must share.

"Madgwick knew me."

"Did he?" said both girls.

"He did; he touched his cap and said, 'Good morning, sir; you must have left Alding early.' We had a long talk, and he told me how many acres I have and where the best land lies. He was scandalized to discover how little I knew about it."

"Madgwick thinks the land more important than its owner. The land owns the owner."

"What did Betty say to you?" said Esther, her eyebrows expressing a shade of anxiety.

"Well, Betty thought I was a poaching tramp, and I don't believe the bad first impression has quite worn off yet. Madgwick must make her think better of me."

The girls shook their heads.

"Nothing but time makes Betty think well of any one. When she has known you for seven years——"

"Seven years! dear Betty," said Robin.

Rhoda was the first to leave the table.

"I'm going to tell mamma; wait till I call you."

"Isn't Rhoda——" began Esther.

"Say it again; you're simply divine when you say 'Rhoda.' You're like a girl's head by Donatello. Your eyes—they're the colour of jade—your eyes are so long, your eyebrows are so straight and their curve is so wide, and your upper lip presses down in the middle the least little bit in the world."

Esther was radiant; she put her elbows on the table and knit her fingers together and made a support of them for her chin. Robin leaned over and just brushed the curve of her cheek with his fingers. The blood flushed her face, her eyelids drooped for one moment, she looked at him shyly. "I had

to touch you to be sure you were there. It's almost incredible. When I awoke I thought I had dreamt it; I ran all the way here; I was amazed to find it was real. It's the most wonderful thing in the world."

"Oh, Robin! yesterday it seemed too wonderful to be true, and to-day it seems too true to be wonderful."

"My sweet," said Robin, kneeling beside her and leaning his face against hers, "thank heaven it is as true as it is wonderful."

Rhoda called them, and they went upstairs.

After George's death Betty had turned his room into a sitting-room for Bella, and here they found her.

She was beautiful. In repose her face had remained the outlooking, un-selfconscious face of a child. The mouth, which life shapes till it betrays or reveals character, was still the pouting, undisciplined mouth of a child. She stared at Robin suspiciously and inquisitively. He paused for a moment at the door, looking at Mrs. Woolvenhurst who stood in the middle of the room, Rhoda by her side holding one hand. Until that moment he had never thought of Esther's mother. For half a minute her beauty, her strangeness and aloofness disconcerted him. Then his mind fixed itself on

her beauty and her grace, and his bow did instinctive homage to the primitive personal dignity that never quite forsook Bella whether in storms of rage or in seasons of apathy.

"Mamma," said Rhoda, "this is Robin."

Robin came near and took her disengaged hand and kissed it. No one before had ever kissed Bella's hand, and the action pleased her.

"Mrs. Woolvenhurst," said Robin beseechingly, "I have come to ask you to let me marry Esther."

Bella sat down on a sofa; Rhoda stood behind it with her hand on her mother's shoulder. Bella fixed her shy, soft, splendid eyes on Robin; his emphasized respect pleased her. Marriage was the most important event within Bella's very limited and very imperfectly comprehended horizon. With a fine gesture she swept out her right arm towards the window.

"To marry her down there in the church?"

Robin never compared people that he liked with any standard of possible conduct or behaviour; for the time being he felt with them and lived in their atmosphere. He admired the movement of the pointing hand, and answered simply, "Yes, in your church."

Bella paused, and nodded her head, and asked

him sharply, "Have you a house for her to live in?"

"Yes, a beautiful house."

"Is it as large as this?"

"It is larger than this, but not prettier."

"And is there furniture in it—a great deal of furniture?"

"Yes, quite enough furniture."

Bella turned her head and asked Rhoda, "Then why is Betty cross?"

Robin was keenly appreciative of the situation; he cast a delighted glance at Esther, who sat smiling, glad that his answers pleased her mother.

"Madgwick knows the house," Esther explained; "and Robin has a great deal of land too; much more land than we have?" she said interrogatively, looking at him.

"Madgwick told me exactly how much, but I've forgotten," he answered, his eyes fixed on Bella.

Bella pouted, and again spoke over her shoulder to Rhoda.

"Then I don't see why Betty need be so cross about it, she's most disagreeable this morning; I don't want her to come near me. Why shouldn't Esther be married? And you, you shall be married some day too."

She nodded defiance at the absent Betty, and turned her head and spoke to Robin—

"Yes, you may marry Esther; I like you to marry Esther."

Robin's face lighted up with a beautiful, gentle expression of gratitude, he caught Bella's hand and pressed it in both his own and murmured, "Thank you, oh, thank you; how good you are to me!"

Rhoda stooped and kissed her mother's hair: "Isn't she a beautiful mamma?"

"We're all beautiful," said Bella, fixing on him her unsmiling gaze.

"Yes, we are," exclaimed Rhoda, "and Robin would not have dared to come here unless he had matched us. But it's just as if we had known him ever since we were born, and I believe we have."

Bella sat still and absently stabbed a ball of coarse wool with a long wooden needle—Betty had taught her to knit with thick knitting needles; sometimes she slowly and clumsily knitted a few rows, stopping when she dropped a stitch, which Betty picked up again later. There was a sound of wheels, and Bella, who was losing interest in what was going on around her, stood up and walked to the window and held the light curtain before her face as she looked out. "It's the butcher," she said, speaking to herself, and without noticing the

others she turned to leave the room. Robin opened the door for her, he took her hand and held it for a moment as he said again—

"Thank you, thank you a thousand times."

Bella's hand fell to her side when he dropped it; she was thinking of the cook and the meat. The door closed behind her and Robin turned towards the two girls.

"She is simply amazing," he cried enthusiastically, "a beautiful queen-mother for my princess and her sister. I never saw such loveliness," he said, looking from one to the other; "I wish there were hundreds of you. Is there no one else for me to see?"

Esther looked at him seriously and inquiringly. "Do you know who we are?"

Rhoda's eyes were fixed upon him too.

"Yes—no; tell me at once."

"Our mother was a gipsy."

For a second Robin's face wore a bewildered look; it broke into smiles, he stamped his foot, he exclaimed—

"Idiot that I was not to know it! Of course you could be nothing else! To think of associating you with the absurd middle class! You are of the oldest, the purest aristocracy in the world. In the name of my thousand years of mushroom ancestry

I bow to yours compared with which the Pyramids are modern."

Betty was at white heat of indignant disapproval. There was no one at Wistons who would share it, so she put on her bonnet and walked to the Rectory.

"I'm not likely to be missed here this morning," she said as she left the house. Very seldom did Betty cease to be meekly or exasperatingly respectful. To-day she met her betters on equal ground.

Mrs. Milldown was placidly mending socks in the dining-room, and Betty sat down facing her.

"I come with news," she began; "news indeed, considering that until this morning early we couldn't have told you there was such a person in the county."

Mrs. Milldown was so surprised that she said nothing, but sat staring at Betty and waiting for her to go on. This Betty did after a moment's pause.

"Miss Esther has gone and engaged herself to be married."

"My dear Betty, you don't say so!"

"But I do say so."

"Be quick, Betty, and tell me to whom."

"I hope you know more about him than we do,

and that needn't be much. He's Mr. Yaldwyn of Alding."

"But Mr. Yaldwyn has been dead these twenty years."

"I should say that that's about the time he has been alive."

"Why, to be sure, there's his son; but where can he have come from? For Alding has been shut up for so long that we've nearly forgotten it. I do think the upper classes should always let their houses if they don't live in them themselves."

"According to Madgwick young Mr. Yaldwyn has been back for the last month with a houseful of servants. There's nothing goes on that Madgwick don't ferret out. Anyway there he is up at our place now, and Miss Esther's going to marry him."

Mrs. Milldown rose.

"The Rector's at his sermon for Sunday, and I make it a rule never to disturb him. Still it seems scarcely right that this should be kept from him. Wait here, Betty."

Mrs. Milldown was gone five minutes; she returned looking almost excited.

"The Rector says it's a great event for Dunton. There's not a title, but the Yaldwyns are the oldest family anywhere round, and until the last one they always married into the aristocracy. But Mrs.

Harold Yaldwyn was a handsome woman, and, for all that she was from the manufacturing districts, gave herself more airs than ever her mother-in-law Lady Emily did. Mr. Milldown says you can't call it a house, it's a mansion, a country-seat. There was no one more popular than Mr. Yaldwyn, and the Rector felt his loss, though he hadn't an acre in our parish."

"Well, where has his son been all this time?"

"When his father died his mother whisked him off abroad, and abroad he has been with her ever since."

"Where he learnt these harum-scarum ways—foreign manners I suppose they call them. I don't hold with such goings on. Marriage is a solemn undertaking and should be entered into solemnly, with proper introductions."

"Of course, Betty, of course. I suppose there'll be triumphal arches: one at Wistons, two on the Common, and one at the gate. And the Rector will marry them even if the Vicar of Aldingly should be asked to assist."

Betty was looking very sour, and her chin quivered. Ordinarily Mrs. Milldown came round to any one's way of thinking after the feeblest resistance. But to-day the news was of so exciting a nature that she scarcely realised Betty's presence.

"Well, to be sure, I shall always regret that Laetitia didn't live to see this. It does seem hard that Laetitia's son should have married so far beneath him and that her daughter," nodding in the direction of Wistons, "should be making this fine match. Poor George, too, it might have roused him. And Rhoda, now—what does Rhoda say to it?"

Betty's eyes gleamed vindictively.

"There, I've no patience with Miss Rhoda. She thinks she knows everything, and she just stares at me as if she pitied me for my ignorance, poor ignorant child herself without a knowing of it. Not that, perhaps, I should have felt so bad about it if it had been her instead of her sister. For Miss Rhoda is not affectionate, while Miss Esther has always been a prey to her feelings. But I'm taking up your time, ma'am, and I doubt if you see it in the same light as I do."

"Oh, of course, Betty, of course. But we must hope for the best. The Rector will speak very seriously about their new duties, and all that, to the young people; very seriously indeed, I feel sure."

Betty reached home more vexed than she had left it. As she was taking off her bonnet in the nursery Robin came into the room. He wished

Betty to be pleased with him, for he was feeling himself part and parcel of Wistons, and nothing outside Wistons was of any importance to him.

Betty turned upon him as he entered; she would have told a sympathetic listener, "that she felt as if she could have flown at him." "And when is the wedding fixed for?" she asked in sarcastic tones.

Robin sat down and looked at her and spoke in the gentlest, most deprecating voice.

"As soon as possible; I should like it next week."

"And what members of your family may we expect to be present, sir?"

"Well, of course there's my mother, but she lives in Venice: she never comes to England. I'll ask her, but I can't help it if she refuses, now can I, Betty? You see, I'm sure she wouldn't come if I were dying, so it's not likely that she will come to see me married, is it?"

Betty's face hardened, she was silent for a moment.

"Then how is Miss Esther to be properly received by your family, sir?"

"Why, Betty, she will be my family directly we are married, don't you see?"

"I suppose that your mother will write a letter and explain her absence?"

"She won't," said Robin, looking frankly at Betty; "she never writes to any one."

Betty compressed her lips and reflected.

"Then there's only one thing to be done, sir; you must go to her after the wedding, and she must receive Miss Esther in her own house as her daughter-in-law, and introduce her to her friends."

"It's a long journey, Betty; do you think Esther will like travelling? I hate it."

"It's not only likings and dislikings as has to be attended to in this life, sir. There's right and wrong, and the right is as Miss Esther should be made welcome by her husband's family. She'll see that herself, I feel sure."

"Well, very well, Betty, she shall decide for herself. She'd find Alding much nicer than Venice in July; you've no idea what an awful place Venice is. I'll go and talk to her about it."

Esther was on the lawn. Robin lay down on the ground at her feet.

"Betty says that directly we're married we are to go and see my mother in Venice."

"In Venice? how lovely!"

"I hoped you would say you wouldn't go there."

"Oh, Robin, I would rather go to Venice than anywhere else in the world!"

"Wait till you've been there! And the travelling, you can't imagine what travelling is!"

Esther looked anxious.

"But your mother will want to see us, won't she?"

"Well, 'want' is a strong expression to use; she'll be quite pleased when we come, and quite pleased when we go, and she won't think about us before or after."

"Oh, Robin, she must be always thinking about you. And I want to see her."

The brilliant look faded from Robin's face; he became gloomy, and picked little bunches of grass out of the lawn.

"I thought we should have been married in the morning, and have gone over to Alding in the afternoon. You don't know how nice Alding is, and I know so well how you will hate the other thing—getting out there, and being there, and getting back again."

Esther wavered. "I don't want to do anything you don't like."

"If I thought you would like it! but you wouldn't. And it's senseless to take a lot of trouble when the result would please neither of us. You do agree with me about that, don't you, darling?"

But in the end it was to Venice that they went. Betty stuck to this plan with pertinacity. She prevailed on Mr. Milldown to say a mild word in its favour. Esther wished it, and was easily convinced that she ought to go. Robin was depressed when the decision was made, and begged Esther not to speak about it. He thought it quite ridiculous to write to his mother and tell her of his engagement, but one morning he sat down at the writing-table in George's old library and composed a letter in which he described Esther's beauty and charm and just touched vaguely upon her long descent.

The letter pleased him very much; he read it aloud to Rhoda and made one or two alterations in it, and read it to her again.

At Wistons within a few days every one but Betty adored him. Intuitively, without reflection, he adapted himself to them all. Rhoda flew to meet him, Madgwick was always close at hand when he arrived. One Sunday he went to church and with Bella received the Sacrament from Mr. Milldown.

For the first week of his engagement Robin walked over in the early morning and walked back to Alding at night. After that he came a little later and drove. And in the evening a saddle-

horse and a dog-cart came to fetch him. Sometimes he rode and sometimes he drove home, oftener he walked. He would return across country under the darkest or the lightest sky.

"I have cat's eyes," he said, with a laugh; "and if I wanted to do anything so disagreeable, I would stroll off to the North Pole with my hands in my pockets and find it."

CHAPTER III

When Robin and Esther reached Venice the Countess's gondola met them at the station. Robin laughed as he said—

"So my mother secured the man after all; he's the greatest blackguard in Venice, there was immense competition for him."

"For which of them?" asked Esther.

"Oh, the fat one, of course."

Esther looked up and down and around her as they came along the Grand Canal. Vague feelings of ignorance and of delight held her silent in surprise. Her heart responded with fluttering, elusive comprehension to the great work of great men.

Robin shut his eyes and slightly shuddered; when he opened them he saw the fresh, expectant look on Esther's face.

"You sweet thing! don't suppose that I don't realize it all; my imagination is too active. When I have once absorbed anything as completely as I have absorbed Venice, it is almost painful to me to renew my impressions, they are too vivid; most people feel nothing."

They landed at the Palazzo and went up the staircase and immerged into the great central sala. A lady came out of a room at the farther end and walked with light, elastic tread towards them. She was tall and plump and pink and white, her hair was very bright, her eyebrows very distinct, the thin lines of her red lips were clearly defined. As she walked her garments rustled. Folds of her gown flew apart and revealed other folds and flounces of lace and silk; chains and pendants caught the light and glittered; the air around her was fragrant as she moved.

The Countess held her left hand out to Robin, who kissed the jewelled fingers. She kissed Esther on both cheeks and held her chin for a moment between her finger and thumb as she turned her head and said to Robin—

"I haven't seen anything so pretty since I was her age myself; the women here are all frights."

"Well, here we are at any rate," said he, "and whatever we look like we're more dead than alive with the heat and the dust and the noise and all the other horrors of travelling."

The Countess laughed.

"You're speckless as usual; I don't know how you manage it."

She turned again to Esther. "The Count is so

sorry not to be here to welcome you; he was obliged to go out."

"The dear Count, he's always obliged to go out," said Robin softly.

"He will meet you at dinner," said the Countess, still addressing Esther. As she spoke she drew Esther's arm within her own and led her away up the next flight of stairs.

"These are your rooms; you can look down on the Canal and see everything that goes on. You will do just as you like here, of course. I suppose I ought to have been cross when Robin wrote and told me that he was to be married in a couple of days. But I said, what is the use of being angry with some one who won't care a straw whether I am angry or not? So I was delighted, which is far less trouble."

A bright smile overspread the Countess's face. The Countess's smile was obedient to her call; sometimes, when she was absent-minded, she summoned it at inappropriate moments. Esther took her white hand and held it for a moment in both her own.

"And now that we've come you don't want to be cross with us, do you? You're so kind and so beautiful I don't believe you could be cross! I'm so happy to be here."

"Darling child," murmured the Countess as she scrutinized the maid and the luggage that just then came into the room.

The Count appeared in the drawing-room before dinner. He was a handsome, tall Italian; he bowed low to Esther as he kissed her hand. He and Robin exchanged greetings. The Count's attitude towards his step-son was frank and English in its cordiality.

The Countess was extended on a pink brocaded silk sofa. She yawned and fanned herself and said she felt enervated, not having gone to the Lido that afternoon. The Count knit his brows and looked concerned as he assured her that she had been greatly missed there. The Duke had entered her cabin and was positively dismayed at her absence, and Monsignor and the Duchess both said that she risked her life by staying in the town all day in such weather.

"I should think so," said Robin; "what on earth did you do it for?"

"Because she waited here for us," said Esther, with soft admiring eyes fixed on the elaborate finished beauty of the lady's face.

"Oh, well, it was her own fault, then; we should have been safe in Beppi's hands. I congratulate you, mamma mia, on having secured that intelligent fat rascal."

The Countess smiled radiantly. She always smiled on Robin, and appeared to put a pleasant interpretation on anything unpleasant in his speech and manner, or to be unconscious of it. Sometimes she murmured, just loud enough to be heard, "Dear Robin."

After dinner they drank coffee in the drawing-room, and the Count arranged pillows behind his wife's head and settled her skirts becomingly around her elegant shoes. He said a few words to Robin and looked at his watch.

"Dio mio! I am late," he exclaimed as he bowed to Esther and kissed his wife's extended hand before he left the room.

"Dear Count!" said Robin; "not altered a bit!"

"I am so glad you think so," murmured the Countess, taking a scent-bottle from the table at her elbow and smelling it. "I felt a little anxious about him in the spring when the horrid influenza was about, but we're neither of us ever really ill."

"Well, you must have extraordinary constitutions to stand this place and this climate; I don't know how you do it."

The Countess smiled and said nothing. Robin took a chair on to the balcony to be cooler, and smoked there.

"I want to tell you," Esther began in a low voice,

"that I do understand how wonderful Robin is, and I do hope you will never be sorry that he married me."

"I'm quite sure I never shall; you will have to be tactful, that's all."

"Indeed I will try to be."

"If one can't begin by knowing every one it's best to begin knowing no one. When they wrote and tried to frighten me I said to myself, 'It's all right, she starts with a blank visiting-book, and that will save no end of trouble.' You must realise from the first how small the world is. Just a few of us wherever we find ourselves—and we feel at home everywhere—just ourselves, dear child, and outside the barbarian hordes."

Esther was puzzled for a moment, then she thought she understood.

"Oh, yes, I see; that is what Rhoda and I always said. We knew there were wonderful people in the world somewhere, and we always meant to find them some day. And then Robin came for me, but Rhoda——"

The Countess interrupted her; she really could not be bored by anecdotes of Rhoda.

"Put that vase straight, will you, dearest child? Anything crooked on the chimney-piece distracts me."

The Countess glanced at the clock; Esther again sat down and said shyly—

"Should you mind if I were to ask you to tell me something about Robin's father?"

"Of course not. There was nothing very distinctive about him. He was, like so many Englishmen, devoted to country life—to farming and shooting and hunting, and all that kind of thing. It got on my nerves to such an extent that I've scarcely been able to live on dry land since. I assure you I never see the bronze horses without thinking of ploughing and a damp climate. It sounds foolish, perhaps, but one can't reason about one's feelings, one must just give way to them."

"Was Mr. Yaldwyn very fond of Robin?"

"Oh, very. But wasn't it inspiration on my part to call him Robin? His father wished him to be Alfred. Now, could any name have been more inappropriate for him than Alfred? Directly he said it 'Robin' flashed into my mind. It was really very strange, for I had never thought of the name before. Of course 'Alfred' would have been ridiculous, and I always think that people are affected in some way by their names."

"Was he a lovely baby?"

"Lovely; he never had an ugly moment in his life."

The Countess's brilliant smile, which had no connection with a sense of humour, or indeed with any other emotion, played over her countenance. Robin came in from the balcony.

"Are you expecting people to-night?" he asked.

"Of course I'm expecting people to-night."

"Then I must be off before they begin to arrive."

"Oh, Robin, don't go away," said Esther, jumping up.

"Just show yourself to-night," said his mother.

"How utterly absurd of you to wish it!" said Robin in dispassionate tones; "what have I to say to the insufferable fools, or they to me? Why should we bore one another?"

"Where are you going?" Esther asked him.

"I'm going to look up some Jews; they're the only people of wit in this God-forsaken town. They've got the brains and the money and most of the palaces; when they've finished chucking out the natives they will have made the absurd place almost inhabitable."

"May I come too?" asked Esther.

"Oh no," interrupted the Countess sharply, "that is out of the question, for if one of them came here it would close these doors for ever, no one else would enter them again."

"Wonderful, isn't it?" said Robin. "Goodbye, mamma mia. Don't let the attentions she will receive turn Esther's head. She had better stick to me. Without vanity she'll find no one as good, on the whole, in Venice."

By degrees enough people came to make the great rooms look filled without being crowded. The Countess kept her position on the sofa, and held out a languid hand to the men and women as they arrived. There were inquiries after her health, and her absence from the Lido was commented on and explained. There was always a little crowd round her; from time to time her eyes dwelt complacently on the groups beyond, and on those further off through the doorways in the other rooms. If there was no great beauty there, each one had made the best of what good looks she had. Women in deep, comfortable English chairs leaned back and stretched their feet far out and talked in low or shrill tones with men who bent forward to put more meaning into their stare, or who stood up and let their eyes wander over the lady they were addressing from the top of her glossy head to the tips of her pointed shoes. Men proposed themselves as lovers, and were refused or accepted; the smiling, imperturbable countenances revealed nothing. Old age kept decently away. There was

no hint of any skeleton at the feast. If any had foxes gnawing at their vitals, the broadcloth and the silk betrayed nothing. Heroism is unobtrusive in a drawing-room.

No subject of any importance was spoken of; trivialities were dwelt on with emphasis; argument grew animated over some disputed question, such as whether So-and-so were present or absent on this or that occasion; whether So-and-so was in a certain lady's box at the theatre last night during the whole evening, or whether he left it early, and when, and why. The interest evolved from the discussion of some such situation was at times so great that two or three groups would be drawn together by it and make one. There was unflagging attention, animation, good-humour. Every one contributed his or her share to the entertainment of the evening. And strangers present for the first time were at once received into the prevailing intimacy.

The Count came in late and made a tour of the rooms, greeting every one with a charming combination of cordiality, deference, and familiarity. He was enchanted to find his wife better; she must not allow herself to run so great a risk again. There was renewed interest in her absence that day from the Lido.

Presently the guests began to depart. The separations would be of brief duration; there were at least three occasions for meeting the next day.

Esther looked over the balcony down into the little flotilla below; the sleepy gondoliers woke up as Beppi called out to them to approach the steps. There was chatter and laughter, and then the black gondolas swerved off to the plash of oars.

Across the Canal the Fortuna balanced herself, at rest in the still air. The stars palpitated overhead, beyond were dark depths of solemn sky. Esther's eyes came down from them to the salt sea streets and the buildings made with hands. That dim sense of wonder, of recognition, of appreciation stirred again within her. She was startled by Beppi's exclamation of surprise at finding her there when he came to close the windows. The big rooms were empty and almost dark; she passed quickly through them and up the hollow-sounding staircase into her own apartment.

Mr. Harold Yaldwyn of Alding first met his beautiful wife at a great charity bazaar, where she was selling at one of the stalls. The handsome income that he settled on her was so ample that the day after the wedding her father made a new will in which her name did not appear. After a few

years of married life, during which Mrs. Yaldwyn made a close study—that began in some bewilderment and ended in the clearest comprehension—of social situations and distinctions, she found herself a widow with a pronounced distaste for country life and for county society. The trustees arranged for the safe keeping of Alding, and Mrs. Yaldwyn left England with Robin. On the Continent she was a person of much consequence, and in Venice she met the Count. He was a member of an old historic family, his name was written in the "Divina Commedia," his ancestry was as unexceptionable as his face, his figure and his manners. Mrs. Yaldwyn decided to marry him, to give up travelling, which she had begun to dislike, and to live in Venice, where comfort was abundant and picturesque, and exertion almost impossible. The Count was satisfied with the immediate prospect, but he was inexorable on the question of provision being made for himself if he should survive his wife. It was delicately, but firmly, put before her that he and his title were of quite unique value to-day when there is intelligent appreciation of whatever is the very best of its kind. Mrs. Yaldwyn, with her hereditary commercial instinct, acknowledged the justice of the argument, though she winced at the price to be paid, which took the

form of a heavy insurance on her own life hedged in with precautions against every possible attempt at evasion of the yearly payments of premium. This being settled the biggest palace to be obtained in Venice was purchased, sumptuously furnished, and made their joint property with remainder to the survivor; the lawyers disappeared and business was never alluded to again. Mrs. Yaldwyn made a further gift of herself to the Catholic Church; the marriage took place in the basilica of St. Mark, and the poor of Venice benefited by the largest number of lire ever yet bestowed on them at a wedding.

The Count and Countess were good managers of what was still a very large and, for Venice, a magnificent income. The Count understood how to "far' figura," and the Countess gave her attention to the solid comforts and luxuries of home.

She found, too, a use for some of her exceedingly rich relations—not for the men, but for the young women. For several of these she arranged marriages thoughtfully and cautiously. It was agreeable to her to say—

"My niece is delighted with the Principe's old home; she won't have a stone touched, so they will have to buy the palazzo next door, as they must have a billiard-room."

Or: "The Duca insists on bringing the children here for the bathing; I am delighted, but my cousin would have preferred the coast of France this year."

Esther and Robin had been a fortnight in Venice; Robin was impatient to leave. He was walking up and down the room talking to Esther, and stopping every now and then in front of her to emphasize some point.

"They can't ask us to leave, poor people, but they must have had enough of us. They probably want these rooms for some strolling English Countess bent on comfort and economy: there's the keenest competition for such guests in this ridiculous place."

"Then let her go to some one else," said Esther laughing.

"You don't know what social dislocation might follow if she did."

"Stay one week longer—only one!" Esther caught him by the hand and looked in his eyes appealingly.

"My sweet, I'll stay as long as you like, I won't speak again of leaving. My Esther! I wonder if you have any conception of the immensity of my love for you? My dearest!"

"Oh, Robin! Even now sometimes I think it is a dream, and that I shall awake some day and find myself leaning on the gate, but that I shall look for you in vain—in vain."

"You will never look for me in vain, in vain. If there had been no other way I should have come to you through the very centre of the earth."

A look of exquisite tenderness and yearning was in his face—a look that had been absent from it in Venice and that Esther had missed. At sight of it she flung herself weeping into his arms.

"Hush, hush," he whispered as he clasped and kissed her—"hush, hush." He dried her eyes: "Be good, silly baby. Why are you not in baby size that I might dandle you in my arms and show you the pretty boats down below till you forgot your foolish tears?"

"Show me the pretty boats all the same," she said, her face held up to him.

They leaned over the balcony and contemplated the life and the decay around them for some moments in silence. Presently Esther said softly—

"Isn't it a wonderful world that contains this," she swept her hand around and brought it back to rest on Robin's, "and then far away behind, the Downs, the darling Downs, mamma and Madg-

wick and Betty, who will never really know there is this too?"

"Happy Betty and —— No! I won't say it, then!"

"Oh, happy you and me! Robin, sometimes I almost catch such wonderful meanings, and then they slip away."

"Oh, silly one! be satisfied with things as they are; it would be very ungrateful of you and me if we were not. Besides, after all, the universe is so obvious, how could it be different? Even to please you I cannot cultivate a spirit of dissatisfaction with things in general; they're good enough for me."

"But if you were poor or a cripple?"

"It's quite evident that I couldn't be either, and I believe that such people have compensations. That is what I call having faith, hope, and charity, and I believe you are a horrid little atheist after all."

"I don't want to be; I should like to have a Father in Heaven."

"And you shall, foolish child," said Robin, closing the conversation with a kiss.

Robin kept no account of time, and as at one of the hotels he fell in with a set of people with whom he was as much pleased as they were with him, he

ceased for a week to speak of going home. Esther saw him late at night and early in the morning, and he amused her with anecdotes and mimicry of his newest friends. Once or twice he stayed in for some meal, to which his mother welcomed him with extended hand. "In all our lives Robin and I have never had an unpleasant moment together; it amazes me to hear of parents and children who cannot get on with one another," said the Countess downstairs to Esther. Upstairs Robin said, "My dear mother and I understand each other perfectly. She is all gush without a scrap of affection for any one; and I'm all common sense and quite satisfied with her as she is. When she decided to treat herself to the Count I gave her my blessing, and now that I have married you, my darling, she has given me hers. She didn't want us here, not she, but you'd never find it out, for if we stopped here for ever she would adjust herself to the circumstances and smile upon us till we closed her eyes in death."

"The Count is devoted to her, isn't he, Robin?"

"Good old Count—ha! ha! Fancy the Count devoted to any one except himself."

"His manner towards her is perfectly charming."

"The Count is an Italian nobleman whose an-

cestors were damned by Dante: his manners are bound to be charming; he owes them to himself."

"I believe your mother is fonder of you than you think."

"She owes a good deal to the Yaldwyns, and, dear thing, she acknowledges the obligation by identifying herself with us; it's the merest chance if you haven't heard her mention some personal characteristic of her own as peculiar to 'us Yaldwyns.' It's very flattering, and I'm delighted."

"Robin, are the middle classes as dreadful as she says they are?"

"They're so very dreadful that it's scarcely decent to speak of them."

"Well, all the same, you and I must both be half-and-half."

Robin laughed loudly. "There's no harm in half-and-half. On the contrary, I find it infinitely satisfactory; for if one half is unspeakable, the other half, undiluted, is enough to damn a man, intellectually. As to you—well, the half that I have seen represented by your mamma (say 'mamma,' Esther, you say it so prettily) has crowded out the wrong half, I should say."

"Don't say the wrong half. I love my father."

"I won't say anything you don't like, you conscientious darling. But you can't expect me to

find in you any trace of the bourgeoisie of my beloved country? Never say that word, Esther! Try as he may to avoid it, it always finds its way to the lips of the true bourgeois; it betrays him as the rattle betrays the rattlesnake."

"I know nothing about either creature; and I'll tell no one that you do."

"How much nicer you are than everybody else! Why do I waste my time here with these fools when I might be alone with you at Alding? Esther! Let us elope together by the next train and sleep at Milan, and go somewhere else the next day, and get back to England as soon as possible."

Esther caught his enthusiasm and flushed red.

"But we can't. I've given Jimpson a holiday and Burton too, and Alinari has taken them both to the mainland, of course, for a treat."

"Then let him courier them home and do something for his wages. You and I will go by ourselves with a couple of hand-bags. Just think of pompous old Alinari panting after us with Burton and the genteel Jimpson! It will take them two days to pack; we shall get a good start."

The Countess said that the only consolation to be got out of their abrupt departure was that they had all been spared the pain of looking forward to it. She kissed them and embraced them; smiles

overspread her face; she forgot to eclipse them. She stepped on to the balcony with a rustle and flutter of costly garments, with a delicate tinkle of costly jewels. The Count went with them down the stairs, and handed Esther into the gondola. He shook hands cordially with his stepson, and told him to bring his charming wife back to Venice as quickly as possible; he regretted that an engagement made it impossible for him to accompany them to the station. The gondola sped away. Esther looked up at the balcony, where the Countess stood in the sun, shading her face with her fan, and waving a handkerchief in pretty little jerks. Robin waved his hat, Esther kissed her hand.

"Do you really think they don't care a straw for us?" she asked sadly.

"I don't think about it: I know they don't," Robin answered cheerfully; "it would be too silly of them if they did."

"It's not silly to be fond of people."

"It's not silly of me to be fond of you, you precious goose; you are so conscientious that you are always trying to reconcile what is with what ought to be."

Esther cast lingering farewell looks around: at the old beautiful worn buildings; at the aggressive, disproportionate new ones; at the gondolas pass-

ing them in discreet haste; at dark eyes observing them from within the shadow of the felze, and a dark head bent quickly forward for a nearer glimpse of her; at heavy barges propelled by men, their bare chests pressed hard against gigantic oars that touched the bottom of the canal.

A ferry-boat was taking over a pale, thin woman. Esther thrust out her hand, and gave the astonished creature some crumpled paper money she was holding.

"What are you doing?" asked Robin; "it's utterly demoralising."

"It was only some scraps of dirty paper," said Esther, laughingly; "rich people have plenty given to them, why not poor ones occasionally?"

"It's altogether different."

"Of course it is," said Esther decisively.

At the station Robin bought fifty newspapers; the seats of the carriage were covered with them. Beppi received his tip with graceful appreciation, and stood back on the platform opposite the carriage door, to be out of the way unless his services should be required. He came forward to bow and say farewell as the train began to move.

Esther looked back as they crossed the long bridge: Robin was absorbed in his papers. She spoke to him once or twice, but he shook a finger

at her as a sign that he was not to be disturbed, and she was aware of a hot feeling of resentment that flared up suddenly within her. She remembered how continually he had been away from her in Venice; how often she had wanted him to be with her, on the piazza at night when it was brilliant with light, and crowded with such foolish people. She had longed for him to look up with her at the dark ceiling overhead that rested on the four corners of the square and that you could not believe was the illimitable sky, at the great foreshortened campanile round which the stars seemed flying, at St. Mark's beyond the lights, so sweet and small you wished to lift it in your hands. How often she had wanted him to be with her in the gondola, to hold her hand and tell her prettier things than any one else could think or say!

The train rolled along in the heat towards Milan, and Esther turned her face to the window and fell to thinking of the brown men and women working on the teeming soil. She thought they looked like animated clay, toiling unceasingly for the insatiable mother of whose substance they were made, to whose substance they must return; hearing, seeing, feeling how much? how little? and for how short a time!

"It isn't fair!" she cried, and impulsively kissed

her hand to the workers. Robin called out to her in surprise. "I'm saying goodbye to Italy," she answered blushing.

Robin crossed over and sat beside her, and together they gazed at the glory and the charm. Suddenly he grasped her hand and said, "I understand everything, completely, thoroughly. Esther, when my book is written you will realize what your husband is."

They stayed for a night at Milan, and as Robin washed his dusty face and hands and brushed his glistening hair he laughed to think that at last they were out of Venice.

"Thank Heavens, we have got away from that melancholy city and the absurd people who inhabit it. We've three days' travelling still, and how I hate it! and what a lot of it I've had! My first recollections are of being smothered in crowds in waiting-rooms; of trotting along platforms; of being pulled up into railway carriages and dragged down out of them again. When once we get back into England we'll never leave it again, will we, Esther?"

In the morning he took Esther's arm and flew with her along the hotel corridor and down the stairs; two days later, on board the steamboat, he waved his hat to the white cliffs.

CHAPTER IV

They had been at home for a couple of months. Esther had gone many times to Wistons; once she had brought her mother and Betty back with her, and Bella was persuaded to stay for two nights at Alding. She had wandered through the rooms pleased with their size and number, pleased with the chairs and tables and with the vast stretches of carpet that covered the floors. She had asked many questions about Robin's mother and about her house. Esther had explained how it was that she was a Countess though Robin was merely Mr. Yaldwyn. At first Bella had suspected unfair dealing—some insult aimed at herself through Esther.

"Because Betty says that titles run in families."

Robin was charmingly attentive during meals, and they did not see him at other times. Later, when Rhoda came to Alding, Robin was in a preoccupied mood. After she had been there a day or two he brought a book with him to table and read it during meals. Esther followed Robin into the library one day after lunch.

"Do you think you are kind?" she asked him.

"Kind?" he echoed in surprise.

"Yes, is it kind not to speak one word to Rhoda and me from morning to night?"

"But there is nothing I have to say to Rhoda, and you and she must have so much to talk about."

"But you had so much to say to her when you first came to Wistons; you made her care for you, you seemed to care for her."

Robin looked bewildered.

"I do care for her—dear Rhoda. But how can a certain phase of mind due to a definite combination of circumstances continue when everything is different? Wistons was enchanting; I adored it; it was unique, unbelievable; it is indelibly impressed upon my mind, upon my imagination; some day you shall see what I will make of it. I will immortalize Wistons; will that satisfy my silly one?"

It might have satisfied Esther if Rhoda had not been there. She did not answer, and after a moment's pause Robin seized her hand and said beseechingly—

"Oh, Esther, surely you understand me! I may be myself here, in our own home? I have brains for six men, I am seething with ideas, I only need time and perfect tranquillity to select from them. You know how glad I am that you should have

Rhoda with you; I love her for your sake. But —I may discuss the whole world with you, my darling, may I not?—I do not find Rhoda sympathetic. I read at table to get my mind clear and into perfect balance. Venice utterly dislocated my mental machinery, and my work ought not to be interrupted again for any one. You are on my side about my work, are you not? I want Rhoda to stay here as long as ever you like, but I can't tell you what it will be to me when you and I are here alone together again. You and I, and no one else —that is what home means to me."

Esther stamped her foot.

"I wish I didn't cry at everything! I'm nearly crying now; I must go upstairs and think about it."

She caught away her hand and ran out of the room, pulling the door to behind her. She locked herself into her room and forced back the tears which anger had brought into her eyes.

"I believe he's the most selfish creature alive! I believe I nearly hate him! Oh, why, why is it like this when I thought it would be so different?"

She tied a handkerchief tight across her eyes and flung herself upon the bed. When she was calmer she sat up and reproached herself.

"Perhaps it is I who am selfish. Perhaps I am doomed to misunderstand Robin. When I think

of him as I first saw him, like a spirit from some world where no one had ever been unhappy, it makes me sick to think that I might sadden him. Imagine Robin an ordinary, commonplace man!" She untied the handkerchief that bound her eyes and smiled. "After all, why should Rhoda care? And am I to feel that my life is wrecked because Robin reads a book as we three sit at table?"

Rhoda had come to Alding expecting to find Robin the same bright creature that had appeared at Wistons. When she found him silent, preoccupied, the light gone out of his face, leaving it as dull as is a lantern when the flame inside has been extinguished, she was not distressed, but she was surprised, disappointed, and perplexed. Standing in her favourite attitude with one foot on the fender, one elbow on the mantelpiece, she observed him attentively. With one hand she was pulling at a lock of her black hair as she had a habit of doing when she was deep in thought and evolving in her mind the solution of some problem that she was living through. The other hand held her book, her first finger keeping the place. She was observing Esther too. Then she turned to the reflection of her own face in the narrow mirror and looked at it long and attentively. She never asked any one for

advice, neither did she ever give it; she was always perfectly satisfied with the counsel which she took of herself. And it was for herself that Rhoda summed up her observations, and to herself that she pronounced judgment on them.

She and Esther were very happy when, for a time, they forgot Robin and wandered over and ransacked the old house. They found cupboards filled with forgotten things—packets of old letters; as they read them the obliterated importance of bygone years started back to life. The blacksmith was sent for from the village to open boxes of which the keys had been lost perhaps a hundred years ago.

"I wonder if there is anything at Wistons that has never yet been found," said Esther.

"I suppose not. Betty has been tidying up ever since we were born; Betty would tidy up an earthquake."

The two girls were seated on the floor, a box full of things was turned out around them.

"It's very nice being here with you, my pretty Esther, and I shall come back some day. But first I'm going to London."

"London isn't very far away, and I will go there with you."

"No; you mustn't. I want to go alone, that's

why I'm telling you, to stop your running after me. I want to be alone."

Rhoda's tragic eyes were fixed on Esther, her voice was sweet and sad and equable.

"But how can you go alone to London? When you get there you won't know what to do."

"Yes, I shall; girls get on very well there alone; I've read about them. You would be in my way," said Rhoda, smiling, and kissing her fingers to Esther across the open box, "and Betty would drive me mad. I want to go away and to come back again. It will be delightful to come back again, so I must first go away. Now don't look anxious as if the whole responsibility of me was upon you."

"You will be so lonely."

"That is just what I want to be. I've always been wishing to be lonely ever since I can remember; it must be a most delightful feeling. I want to see strangers—strangers everywhere, streets and houses full of people I have never seen before."

Esther looked very anxious.

"Promise me, Rhoda darling, that you will send for me immediately if you feel frightened, or if you find after all that it is dreadful to be lonely; the very word terrifies me, it is like being in a grave and knowing you are there."

"Oh, you foolish, dear Esther!"

It was a cold, damp winter evening, and Esther was in a low chair with her feet on the fender, thinking. She had been out all day and was tired enough to realize the perfect bodily comfort of rest. The big room was pleasantly warm, the lamplight glowed subdued beneath wide-spreading shades, the atmosphere was sweet with the scent of hothouse flowers. Esther glanced around with great appreciation of the harmonious whole. There were portraits on the walls, and down on the newest Yaldwyn the old Yaldwyns were looking with smiling, well-bred interest. The carpets and curtains were time-toned; the furniture was of the finest period, exquisite in proportion and workmanship. Nothing was new except the comfortable chairs and sofas of skilful modern upholstery. Esther shut her eyes and in thought reviewed the day. By degrees there returned the disturbing impressions she had received—sickness in the village, shallow talk of neighbours in other big houses, the pathetic figure of the little village schoolmistress, her surprise at the unknown country only ten miles away from the village where she had lived for ten years.

"I would rather be alone, but she shall drive with me again."

The old feeling of her childhood that she was re-

sponsible for every one was strong in her to-night. She sighed as Robin came in and stood behind her with his hands upon her shoulders.

"For what is my sweetheart sighing?"

"It must be because I am too happy."

"Hardhearted one to grudge my Esther her happiness," he answered, kissing her dark hair.

"Robin, I do wish I was all fingers and toes, they are so comfortable; see, I am moving them all together to realize it. It's only when I think of other people that I am unhappy."

"My silly girl! just listen to me. We are so wonderfully made that our machinery adjusts itself to any angle. If you are happy and your fingers and toes are comfortable, you may take it for granted that everything is all right. That kind of uneasy sentimentality is the fatal folly, let us fight it with our five senses and thank the gods for having given them to us. Now you be happy, and I'll write the most wonderful novel and it shall bring us fame and glory."

Esther smiled.

"I ought to have been a Roman Catholic," she said, "with an austere confessor who would have directed my conduct and given me the most soul-satisfying penances."

"Be anything you please, you'll never find me

interfering; I like any good, orthodox, established religion. Shall we have a private chapel and a well-bred chaplain in discreet evidence?"

Robin stretched himself on a sofa, Esther stared at the fire. She was wondering whether it would be possible to be so comfortable that she wouldn't care about anything else; to be lapped in such ease that she would realize nothing beyond the perfection of it. She could at least imagine definite gain in that direction—in any other was not life a perpetual, raging battle, with a vague, irrational God oftenest on the wrong side? The fire had caked at the top, she leant forward and poked it, and the action brought her back from generalities to herself and Robin.

In the six months which had passed since the railway journey between Venice and Milan, Esther had many times sat in silent judgment on Robin and, in her own mind, had given a violent verdict against him; a moment later, with quick revulsion of feeling, she would blame herself alone. To-night as she looked at him she reproached herself for having ever criticised him even in thought.

"What am I," she asked herself, "compared to him?"

She knelt down on the floor beside him and laid

her face against his hand, and Robin became confidential and talked of his great literary schemes.

One afternoon Esther had ridden over to Wistons. Dismounting in the farmyard, she stayed there a few minutes talking to Madgwick, and was startled when he spoke of something that had happened "since Miss Rhoda be gone away." A pang went through Esther's heart: Wistons was forlorn, only her mother was there now. Madgwick and Betty were sadder than in old days; they must miss the dead Woolvenhursts whom they had served and buried, and the living ones who had gone away too. She walked round to the front of the house and looked through the nursery window at Betty. Betty saw her, and her face lighted up with satisfaction.

"Betty dear, has Rhoda gone to London?"

"Why, of course she has gone to London; she said you knew."

"I knew she was going; I did not know she had gone."

"She never ought to have gone; whoever heard of such a thing? But there's no reasoning with her. She listens to all you say and looks hard at you all the time and never interrupts you with a word, and then goes her own way as if you'd never spoken,

and she never explains nothing. I do think Miss Rhoda's a dreadful anxiety."

"I'm afraid she didn't like being at Alding."

"I don't think as that made her go away; nothing never vexes Miss Rhoda."

Esther reflected. Betty said, "Perhaps you had better go up and see your mamma. I do think she seems to alter. I believe her head worries her more than any one thinks for. She strikes it continually, not hard, but soft like with her open hand."

"But she always did that."

"Not near so often as she does it now."

"Betty, you don't think she will ever go out of her mind?"

"That's a cruel thing to say of any one, I won't say it of her. But she has been different to other people all her life, and it's bound to increase as she grows older. She has never been the same, you may say, since your poor papa died and you grew big and she couldn't scold you. It don't seem to agree with her never being aggravated."

Betty was brushing the dust from Esther's habit.

"Does mamma miss Rhoda?"

"Not that she knows; but I think she does miss her all the same. Miss Rhoda never seemed to notice that she was particular-like, and you always did from a baby."

"I wish I hadn't," said Esther passionately.

"Well, we're all made different," said Betty, putting away the brush.

Esther found her mother with some knitting in her hands and the cards scattered over the floor till Betty should pick them up again. Bella had renounced the big needles and the coarse wool for a fancy to make muffatees in bright colours. She kept them in a basket and was pleased that the pile grew. Esther had brought with her some small things from Venice, and it amused Bella to see her arrange them on the mantelpiece and to suggest where the bead bags should hang. Her interest in Robin's mother continued: "And has she more furniture in her bedroom than I have in mine? And is her maid as careful as Betty is, and has she been with her as long? And are you quite sure you ought not to be a Countess too?"

Esther went home to Alding saddened by her day at Wistons. She met Robin in the hall. "Robin, Rhoda has gone to London."

"Well, she couldn't do anything much more foolish; Rhoda's an obstinate little bore. But don't worry yourself, my darling; you can't control her, and do remember that you are not Atlas, and that you don't support the world. Think of the For-

tuna turning cheerfully round on her golden ball with every wind that blows."

Esther was irritable as well as sad. "I neither wish to be like the Atlas nor the Fortuna. I must think of Rhoda, and of mamma, and of other people, too. Life is not like that opera bouffe we saw in Venice; I wish to heavens it were."

They were standing in the hall where they had met. Robin hung his head and began walking up and down on the thick Turkey carpet. "Esther, don't be angry; no one was ever angry with me in all my life."

"They were with me," she said, her eyes flashing. "I'm glad they were!"

Esther ran upstairs and threw herself, sobbing and shaking, on the sofa in her room. She forgot Rhoda and thought only of Robin. It was too bewildering. Who was it that had come to her that summer day? Was that Robin? or was this he? She rocked to and fro, she alternately reproached and pitied herself and him.

"It is my fault! It is his fault! Other people must pay for his perpetual gaiety. Perpetual gaiety! Poor Robin, I take care that shall not be!"

It ended by her going to find him in the library. She flung herself into his arms. "It was a bad dream, forget it!"

"It was my bad dream, then. Everything is my fault always. You are perfect." Robin was choking with emotion.

There were many such crises in every week. Esther thought of Robin as she had first known him, with sympathies quicker and more sensitive than her own; with a charm that made all who came into his presence happier. Now he seemed nebulous; like vapour he was always assuming some new and unfamiliar shape.

"And why should he not?"

She was sure that he loved her more than in those first days; then why should she care if he loved some other people less? She wept as she remembered with what exquisite passion he returned to her after an hour's estrangement. What delicious pain it was to be held tight to him, clasped in his arms! But after? Must life consist of whirling excitement followed by monotony and flatness?

Sometimes dinner was eaten in silence while she made sharp, sarcastic, mental comment on him, till suddenly he looked up with an expression of unconscious sweetness, and she clasped her hands on her lap and bit her lip in an agony of self-reproach.

One happy day he talked about his novel, and for two hours read to her aloud. Her enthusiasm delighted him: he said it was inspiring. Another

day he tore up a good deal of it because he said he now understood things so much better that it would be absurd not to destroy what was quite unworthy of him. He and Esther were sitting together before the library fire, holding down with tongs and poker the burning sheets of manuscript.

"Robin, are you ever sorry you married me?"

"I? I sorry I married you? My little Esther, I should die without you. When first I saw you, and that was before you saw me, I knew my wife was there. And now we are here and I have got you for ever; no power on God's earth can tear us apart."

"Robin, darling Robin, I wish those first days could come again."

"I don't, these are infinitely better; you know they are. I was a young ass," he said merrily. "I wonder you didn't tell me I was; Betty did."

"But I never wanted you to change. Rhoda and I were so happy, we thought the Heavens had opened to us."

"If they did, they will never close again while I am alive."

But though the evening ended gaily, Robin was moody and preoccupied the next day, and after dinner he startled Esther by saying suddenly that he must go to London—that night, if possible, to-mor-

row at latest. It was after luncheon on the following day that he went away.

When Esther drove home, after waving him farewell as the train steamed out of sight, she was surprised at herself for feeling glad to be alone.

CHAPTER V

Robin settled himself in his rooms at the hotel. He bathed, changed his clothes and walked slowly downstairs out into the street. There he stood irresolutely on the pavement, undecided where to go. After a brief hesitation he turned his face northward and walked towards Mayfair. He entered a big block of buildings, and shaking his head at the lift-man he sprang up the stairs, two steps at a time. He stopped on one of the landings and knocked. The door was opened by a fair-haired girl with pink cheeks and large blue eyes.

"I knew your knock; we are glad to see you, and I suppose you expect us to give you dinner."

"Of course, and a very good one too."

"You shall have it if I fetch it myself."

Robin walked up the passage and opened the door into a luxuriously furnished drawing-room that seemed filled with violet velvet draperies and Dresden china figures on violet velvet brackets. A handsome woman with hair of that peculiar shade of deep red that suggests crimson was lying back in a low chair with her feet on the fender. Her

sulky expression did not change as Robin called out cheerily—

"I've come straight from the station."

"You must have been terribly bored somewhere." She held out a firm, white hand, which Robin pressed for a moment. He pushed an armchair across the floor till it faced hers and said, as he dropped into it—

"I've come to dinner."

In the soft voice that took the sting out of mere words he went on—

"You live in the same quaint way, I see. Well, it doesn't matter as long as Gunter is at hand; but if you think it economical you are mistaken."

The lady pouted. "It's all right when I expect any one, but I hate people dropping in."

"The huggermugger must be awful. How you can bear the sight of that old charwoman crawling about in her bonnet, I don't know; and it can't be convenient to wait until the stores close before your butler turns up. It amounts to misdirected genius to have thought out such a system."

Miss Pinker had come into the room. She shook her finger at Robin.

"You're not to tease her: we've improved. We dine every night, even if the lady in the bonnet does prepare our simple meal. I put my foot down one

day and said that whiskey and red herring in bed was the road to ruin, and that my duty was to lead Mrs. F. the other way."

Mrs. Ffrench said, "Oh, do leave off!" not because Robin was there, but because she was cross.

It was characteristic of Robin that no one had secrets from him. The cupboards were opened, the family skeletons were revealed, and he rattled them cheerfully and familiarly.

"I shall see you at dinner," said Miss Pinker good-humouredly. "I must finish up a lot of things to-night."

"Just as if we wanted her," said Mrs. Ffrench, as the door closed.

"My dear Mrs. F., what on earth is the matter with you? Pinker is an excellent creature; you'll be a fool if you quarrel with her."

"She knows better than to quarrel with me and go back to Clapham and her family."

"You've got the best of the bargain, I should say. You'll find no one else to do all she does for board and lodging and old clothes; and you know how mean you are and how you hate parting with your pennies."

"Oh, do leave off talking about Pinker."

"Certainly; I didn't invent Pinker."

"Oh, don't mention her name again."

Mrs. Ffrench stared up at the ceiling for some moments in silence, then, as Robin said nothing, she turned her face suddenly towards him.

"So you've remembered my existence at last, the country must be dull."

"The country is charming. My dear lady, don't be cross, you don't look nice."

"You always said you'd never marry any one."

"Well, I changed my mind."

"Then why didn't you marry me?"

Robin looked amazed. "You know you wouldn't have had me. You won't make me believe such an idea was ever in your silly head." He laughed his sudden, shrill laugh. "It would have been like marrying your own widower. And, besides, I fell in love."

Mrs. Ffrench sneered.

"Now, Mrs. F., don't be unkind. A man must have a home, and he can't have a home without a wife; life's so many-sided—you know you understand perfectly."

"Well, what's she like?"

"What is the use of asking absurd questions? Besides, it's bad taste; you know how you jar on me sometimes." Robin bent forward and stared gloomily at the carpet. "If I'd known you were in

this abominable temper I should have stayed away; I thought you would be so pleased to see me. Of course I can go."

"No, no; of course I am pleased to see you; there! be friends."

Robin kissed the shapely fingers she held out and gave her back her hand.

Mrs. Ffrench suddenly became voluble. She told Robin fifty little familiar things that had happened since she had seen him, and asked him fifty trivial questions. She could only talk tête-à-tête; a third person—Miss Pinker did not count—made her suspicious of criticism. She chattered till Miss Pinker came back, saying as she entered the room, "Come along, Mrs. F., and dress."

They went into the adjoining room and continued the conversation with Robin through the open door. When Mrs. Ffrench returned she was dressed in white soft muslin, there were pink roses in her hair and on her breast, her cheeks were cherry colour; the clash of colour between hair and face and flowers was in extraordinary contrast with the soft whiteness of the muslin.

The double door that divided the drawing-room from the dining-room was flung open by the "Evening Primrose," as Miss Pinker called the man, and the three sat down at the cosy little dinner-table.

Mrs. Ffrench had a pretty, impulsive way of being hospitable in her own house; the dinner had been ordered with discrimination, the diners were merry. Robin talked of himself, Mrs. Ffrench listened, Miss Pinker laughed. They had coffee and cigarettes in the drawing-room; afterwards Miss Pinker, still laughing, curtseyed to them in the doorway and returned to her work.

When Robin left there were neat packets of corrected proof on a table near the outer door, and on a white slate Miss Pinker had written, "Please post them. Thank you!"

Robin dropped the packets into a post-box as he strolled towards his hotel, not missing a sight or sound of the dim London dawn. "Poor chap," he said, and propped a drunken man against a portico. He talked for ten minutes with a policeman and sympathized with his grievances and gave him half a sovereign. As he neared his hotel the street lamps were burning yellow to themselves in the cold light of coming day. He stood still again with his hands behind him and noted everything and nodded approvingly.

The hotel was waking up. In his room the fire was brightly burning; near it on a table were his writing things, Esther had put her photograph in the blotting-book, and it lay there, face uppermost.

He took it in his hands and looked at it and kissed it and cried impulsively—

"How lovely!"

With a quick movement he sat down and wrote to her—

"My own Wife,—I cannot sleep without telling you that I have found your photograph. I have kissed it. I love you, my Esther, I love you. You love me, so you know. My sweetest, my sweetheart, I shall soon come home, for home is you.

"Your Husband."

As he wrote, the look that some one had called his "angel-look," overspread his face. He rang and gave the letter to be posted, and went to bed and slept, softly and soundly, like a tired child.

Robin returned unexpectedly one evening by the last train. He left his luggage and his servant to be fetched from the station and walked home. He was in high spirits and stood with his back to the drawing-room fire and walked up and down the room talking to Esther of the people he had seen in London. Within certain limits, and from a certain point of view, Robin was the keenest observer of character, and what he observed he could record.

His eye detected weakness, folly. At them he laughed his shrill laugh. The next moment his voice would be husky as he spoke feelingly of the pathos of that same weakness and folly. In Robin's descriptions there were neither digressions nor superfluous explanations, but each sentence conveyed the exact meaning that he intended. As she laughed and listened Esther's bright, delighted eyes followed his movements. His presence there before her, his voice, his laugh, were spells that dispersed the doubt and oppression that had weighed upon her in his absence.

"I saw Rhoda, I went to please you. She's a little fool—well, I won't say so if it annoys you. She's surrounded by young women with 'ideas.' Strange young men make love to her. She herself, amongst them all, retains her own distinction, and in time I suppose she'll get sick of them, but at present I believe she thinks that every other queer creature she comes across is a genius. Rhoda has no sense of humour. We shall hear of her heading a procession to Trafalgar Square."

"Do you think she's happy?"

"I think she's cracked."

It was late when Robin exclaimed, "It is so wonderful to come back and find you here; you understand everything, you are everything. It is as if

one had been idling by the trickling streams and had reached the open sea at last!"

As they went upstairs Esther said—

"Robin, shall we ask them all down here? Shall we fill the house?"

Robin paused on the landing.

"If it would amuse you. But not now. I have left them all behind with the greatest pleasure; we'll wait until the edge of my appreciation is keener again."

For a week Robin talked to Esther about himself and about his work. He had returned with the freshest interest in everything. He told her what he wanted done in the house and on the estate. He saw visitors, and when invitations came he said, "Accept? of course we will accept." He wrote out the names of guests for two or three dinners at Alding.

One morning Esther sent for the keeper to come to the dining-room window and speak to her. "Harris, I've asked Madgwick over on Monday for a day's shooting: of course he can take what he likes and you can give away in the village what is over; I'll make you out a list."

"Very good, ma'am, and I hope they're all well at Wistons, ma'am."

Harris walked off. Robin looked up to say he

was glad she had thought of old Madgwick without consulting him. She would manage to arrange that he should not have to see Madgwick on Monday, would she not? He was so nervous that the mere idea of anything that had inevitably to be done almost paralysed him.

Esther laughed and said she was improving. Last year she would have cried at the suggestion that he should not be sacrificed to Madgwick's feelings.

"Harris ought to keep the poachers off the place," said Robin emphatically.

"Oh, the poachers," said Esther gaily; "I am for the poachers. It is so rude to say, 'These are all mine, you shan't have one.'"

Robin answered, a little irritably—

"It's my affair to uphold the law. Harris thinks I ought to be on the bench."

Esther laughed.

"Why do you laugh? Sometimes you don't seem to understand me at all."

"Well, it is rude to pounce on people for taking things that we don't want."

Robin frowned and Esther held out her hand across the breakfast-table. "I won't be disagreeable and argue. You shall send the men to prison and I will pay their fines and comfort their families

with half-crowns. You shall uphold law and order, and I will back my principles."

Robin laughed. "All women since the Fall are law-breakers by instinct! And yet there are men in favour of giving them the Franchise!"

Esther forgot that she had ever been unhappy. She wrote long letters to Rhoda. Every three or four days she rode over to Wistons. There she walked with her mother in the garden and played cards with her upstairs, or asked her to read aloud. She had long, endless talks with Madgwick and with Betty.

"It does us good to hear you trotting up the lane, and we feel so much better when you go away that we scarcely miss you," Betty said one day when she was starting to ride back to Alding.

Once or twice Esther began to tell Robin of her own occupations. The first time he did not listen; the second time, with a sweet, anxious expression on his face and in a soft, appealing voice, he told her that his whole mind was so absorbed in his work that he feared to think of anything outside it. Esther was quite content to hear him speak about himself, but by almost insensible degrees his silence and his solitary habits returned. He walked alone for miles in fine weather and in storms of wind and rain. In silence Esther handed him invitations

from neighbours. He begged her to accept them for herself and to refuse for him. Esther flashed out that she also thought the neighbours fools and that she did not wish to see them, she would refuse for herself too.

"Of course, dearest, do always as you wish. In a way it would help me to have these social matters attended to; you know I do not think they should be neglected. But I never want any one to do what they don't like."

"I shall refuse for us both." Esther spoke angrily; she had to wait until her hand stopped shaking before she could write the note.

It was peculiar to Robin that each phase of his, of habit or opinion, appeared to the spectator and to himself to be final. He was contemptuous of all he had been before; former experience had taught him present wisdom; he disclaimed responsibility for all past action; he had been a child or a lunatic until last night.

Esther again grew critical. Resentment against Robin flared up within her. To hide her emotion and her indignant tears she ran upstairs and locked the door and paced up and down the rooms with clenched fists, and sobs and gasps of rage and sorrow. From herself and Robin her thoughts flew off to other things. It seemed to her that everywhere was suffering and futility.

"What is the use of it all? Why was I born?" Anger against some horrible machinery that had caught her up, against which fighting and resistance were vain, possessed her and manifested itself in bursts of childish fury. She opened drawers and wardrobes and flung their contents on the floor: she threw herself upon the bed and beat the pillows. And all the time she was conscious of a second self, a calm spectator of her actions, that convicted even her blind fury of insincerity. This second self drove her to bathe her face, to stand before the glass and smooth her hair.

"Oh, you fool!" she said aloud, addressing herself in the mirror, "it doesn't matter what is done to you—you feel nothing, you are unreal, you do not exist! You are a temporary reflection of a thousand other things!" She swung the glass round, dismissed her image, and put on her hat and cloak. In the corridor she met her maid. Before speaking she stood looking at her for a moment and thought what a foolish face she had and wondered what her soul was like.

"Jimpson, please make my room tidy."

As she did so Jimpson addressed the walls. "It's most peculiar conduct, no doubt, but that husband of hers is enough to drive any one out of their right senses. His goings-on have almost set me against

marrying, and if I wasn't sure that Henry is the most inoffensive young man as ever was I'd never so much as walk out with him again."

Esther ran a little way along the carriage drive, sat down on a low stone post and dug the heel of her boot into the ground.

"I hate the place and everything about it." As she said this aloud to herself she saw Robin come out of the house. "He's looking for me," she murmured, and a lump came into her throat.

If he was looking it was with the wish to avoid her; his eyes glanced her way for an instant, and he walked off in the opposite direction. Esther, who had risen and in another moment would have beckoned to him, turned away and walked on until she had nearly reached the gates. "I can't talk to Mrs. Lane to-night," she thought as she stopped short. There was a copse on her left and she ran along the narrow path that divided it; the brushwood met overhead; in sheltered spots a few pale, precocious blossoms were fading. Esther pitied them.

The path ended at a gate leading into a brown ploughed field; the land sloped downwards, and in the west, behind a row of elm-tree tracery, was a purple, dusky winter sunset.

She leaned upon the gate, and, though she shook her head in mute refusal to feel pleased, she waited there until the earth had tilted up and daylight was gone.

"It seems that the end of the world is everywhere," she said as she turned and went slowly back through the interfering branches. When she reached the hard, white carriage drive the spacious darkness was around her. She looked up at the sky and sighed.

"Too far, too high, and yet sometimes I feel as if my soul could fill it."

At a turn of the road the lights of the house shone out. She stood still and looked at them with sharp repulsion for all they stood for—the soft carpets, the tables laid for luxurious meals, the deft, silent servants.

"A dead house, a body without a beating heart, this is no one's home. If the shutters were not closed I would walk round and peep in and inspect this strange place."

She walked very slowly towards the front door, and when she was close to it Robin's softest voice came out of the darkness—

"Esther, is that you?"

She did not answer him nor touch his outstretched hands.

"Esther, speak to me! Oh, my dear, you are so late, and you know I'm a perfect fool when I feel anxious about you."

Esther passed him in silence. Robin followed her into the house, across the hall and half way up the staircase. She turned and said, her voice shaking a little—

"I'm going to dress for dinner."

In her room bright fire, lights, pretty clothes, and Jimpson were waiting for her. She lingered after dressing. When she heard Robin go into his room she ran down to the drawing-room and took up a book and read it in the corner of a sofa. Tears filled her eyes, she had to blink very hard to keep them back. Robin stole in and kissed the top of her head and sat down behind her and held a ribbon that was attached to her gown and stroked it. Esther's hand shook, she said nothing. When dinner was announced Robin drew her arm through his; he was very gentle and very attentive. Esther answered him, but said nothing unless he spoke to her. After dinner, in the drawing-room, she took up a magazine and gave it to Robin, saying—

"Look at the pictures, I want to read." The pictures amused Robin, and when he had looked at them Esther gave him others. These bored him and he got up from the depths of an immense arm-

chair and came across to her. She pushed her chair away, and said with suppressed excitement—

"No, go away! I cannot talk, I am tired of hearing things—tired, tired."

Robin stood looking at her. She read, turning the leaves and not lifting her eyes from the print. He sat down on the arm of her chair and covered her book with his hand. She looked up and met his anxious eyes fixed on her face. Resentment died within her. He took her hands and held them within his own. He spoke at last in broken accents.

"I'm a tiresome, worrying husband, but you'll forgive me always? Esther, my very life is bound up in yours."

He knelt beside her on the floor and Esther sobbed when she felt his face against her own.

"Oh, Robin, it is my fate to make you sad!"

"No, no," he said softly, "only I think I mean yes, yes. It is so good to feel like this, it brings us so close together. Esther, my little Esther, be very patient with me."

She slipped out of the chair and they sat together on the floor holding each other's hands.

"It is I who need forgiveness; you are so gentle, you cannot even imagine how hard and bitter I can feel. Robin! I have lain awake at night and

cursed you!" She began to cry with her head against his shoulder. He dabbed her face with his handkerchief.

"Curse away as much as you please! I will take care that your curses do not go home to roost!"

"There's a devil inside me!"

"Then he's my devil too, and I love him!"

"Sometimes I want to murder you!"

"Oh, my dearest, kill me whenever you wish, and if they kill you afterwards my spirit will mount the scaffold with you, and with you will drop down into the hole where our souls will meet, and I am sure that the Everlasting One will be very good to us."

Esther smiled.

"Robin, you won't like being an immortal soul, will you?"

"How I love to see you laugh! Now tell me seriously, do you believe that any power that ever was invented could come between us? Are not you and I the inevitable factors?"

Robin rose to his feet as he spoke and took her hands and pulled her up to him.

"You are the nicest thing in the world," he said, "and the most amusing, and I know it. The fact is, madam, that I am desperately in love with you."

CHAPTER VI

When Robin made a list of the people who were coming to stay at Alding, Esther stood by him looking over his shoulder and laughing at his graphic description of each of them. Their most serious qualification appeared to be that they all appreciated him, and, to the extent of their capacity, understood his work.

"They're bound to amuse you," he said looking up, "and they shall all arrive by the same train. I won't have them dribbling in and grumbling when they hear who's coming next."

It was a cold afternoon in May when Robin met the train; Esther waited in the hall to give the guests tea. At five o'clock they arrived, a little crowd of wrapped-up and talking people. They shook hands with her and stared at her for a moment, the women coldly, the men with curiosity. The preoccupation of each seemed to be that Robin should attend to what he or she was saying.

Robin begged Mrs. Ffrench to remove her furs, which made her look like an advertisement of the International Fur Stores, he said.

"Leave her alone," cried Twining, a pallid young man who spoke with a cockney intonation. "You know she only makes up for one effect at a time, and this is a first-rate entrance."

Mrs. Ffrench pouted. She did not know whether she was being complimented or laughed at.

"Now, don't bother her," said Miss Pinker coming to the rescue.

Mr. Lionel Rouse stood by observant: he rarely spoke. He had an expressive way of making a sudden gesture in the air that was understood to epitomise a poem.

Miss Lily Humber unclasped a heavy cloak, which fell around her on the floor, she wore beneath it a light summer gown with a trailing skirt. Miss Humber did not prefer Robin to everybody else; she expressed her preference for Mr. Percival Pearson by staring only at him. He was finishing a sentence, his eyes resting on one person after another. "I assure you I haven't the least idea what she meant," he said.

"For whose benefit is this pathetic innocence?" cried Robin, his high-pitched laughter rising above the laughter and the chatter of the others. Pearson said again, every other word strongly emphasised—

"I assure you I can't imagine what she meant."

Lady Fanny stood a little apart, sipping her tea

and watching every one with round, green eyes. She had a freckled face and waving, silky, sandy hair; her face had the expression of a surprised kitten.

"That expression and her claws are her stock-in-trade," Miss Humber said languidly to Pearson.

"Oh, she altogether bores me," he answered.

Maurice Stokes was the youngest of the men. He was tall, his face was pink and easily turned brick red, he had large features and thin, compressed lips. He was without a sense of humour and seemed always to be in a state of suppressed indignation. His opinions were almost purely negative; he disapproved of nearly everything. A conviction on any subject he said was a pose. He declared that Robin was the only open-minded, unprejudiced person he had ever met, he almost permitted himself to admire him. He never laughed, he stammered a little and was extremely shy. He was writing a general criticism of literature.

There was more talk and laughter. Esther sat by the tea-table silent and angry. No one spoke to her and no one answered her when she spoke to them. Once she started from her chair, but Robin was near and put his hand caressingly on her shoulder, and when he whispered, "Be a spectator, be an amused spectator," she sat down again and looked

from one person to another remembering what Robin had told her of them and trying to smile at the recollection.

Presently Miss Pinker carried Mrs. Ffrench off to dress. The party broke up and Esther went away to her room.

Robin came to her just before dinner.

"I hope you don't dislike them, poor dear people."

Esther did not answer.

"They're all afraid of you; you will be kind to them, won't you? You won't stare at them stonily?"

"I won't stare at them; but I won't shout at them either."

"You amusing darling, how quick you are! Of course, in one way, they are a preposterous lot, but what is one to do until the Superior Person has been endowed with understanding? At present he is hopelessly wrong on every point that is of vital consequence; buying the bad pictures, disfiguring the land with bad buildings, reading the pompous rot, responsible for the spurious reputations. Oh, I've studied him up and down and through and through! For two whole years I met no one but him and his family. His family!" Robin cried. "Ha! ha! In Art, Politics, Religion, and Literature the Su-

perior Person has never been done justice to yet. He has been waiting for me."

Robin paused, looked grave and continued—

"I don't know how it is, I can't account for it, but somehow or other these fellows feel, these fellows know, they are the makers of the reputations that endure. Sometimes it does me no end of good to have people about who know what I am after: my work is so peculiar, so personal that I must occasionally be with people who see things as I see them. I doubt if I could go on with it otherwise. I know that you appreciate it, my darling, but that's different. The fact is that in a way you know too much; it paralyses me to hear of other work, however greatly I may admire it. You have read too much for your opinion to be of the least value to me. Can't you understand?"

Robin stopped before her in his walk up and down the room. Esther reflected, hesitated.

"Yes, I think I can. But these people have read everything too, haven't they?"

"Oh, yes, of course. But quite differently; from another standpoint. You must see what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"The way you can help me, my sweetheart, is by just loving me. Love me and humour me a lit-

tle, be kind and hospitable and let us have here the people who inspire me."

"I will; I will do everything for you. I may laugh at them when we are alone together, mayn't I?"

"Of course; why, this is what it means to be married, this cosy understanding between ourselves."

"Then tell me what is the matter with Miss Humber? She looks in despair and she never takes her eyes off Mr. Pearson."

"Poor girl, she has had a rough time of it! Fancy the bore of being in two divorce suits—two! It hasn't soured her a bit, which is immensely to her credit. She's devoted to Pearson and thinks him a genius, which he isn't."

At dinner Pearson sat next to Esther; he asked her if she had been received at Farm Street or the Oratory. She told him she was not a Catholic; he expressed great surprise.

"It's the only possible religion: that or nothing, and of course Agnosticism is altogether too depressingly Early Victorian. But the Church! What genius for organisation! what marvellous intelligence from first to last! Money and the masses, she collects them both. She does not refuse the pauper's penny and she will devote almost as much attention to his conversion as to mine. And what

comprehension of human nature! You needn't come to her with your character from your last place, she accepts your own statements and gives you brevet rank."

Stokes looked apoplectic, which those who knew him best said was his way of expressing agreement.

Robin was laughing shrilly at the other end of the table. Lady Fanny's green eyes were round and solemn; she blew a cab-whistle and called—

"Hansom!"

The whistle was a small silver cross.

"Atrociously bad taste," said Pearson in confidential tones; "you could only find it where the aristocracy and the Church of England are combined. Her father is an Earl and a Dean, you know; it oughtn't to be allowed."

Miss Humber shut her eyes and crossed herself. Esther looked from one person to another in surprise. Miss Pinker laughed. Mrs. Ffrench retained her calm: Mr. Lionel Rouse, opposite, gazed immovably at her.

Pearson, with emphasis, turned from the company towards Esther and talked of Robin.

"He's a poet, you see, as well. The poet and novelist for whom we have been waiting. We've had too many pretenders: men who insist on writing what none of us wish to read."

Miss Humber, who had published many novels, drawled out—

"Has Robin ever published any of these masterpieces?"

Pearson addressed his answer to Esther; she stifled a laugh as his reproachful gaze was fixed upon her.

"Published?" and he repeated the word two or three times.

"But I suppose you expect him to publish?" continued Miss Humber.

Pearson looked at Esther for a moment as if it were she who had spoken; then his expression softened, and he said soothingly—

"We expect everything of Robin—everything, as you must yourself. Do nothing to influence him; leave him free. Robin's is the elemental nature; married to it is the sacred poetic temperament. What may we not expect from such a union? Be one of us who have the wit to recognise genius and to proclaim it!"

Esther glanced at Robin.

"I believe in him," she said.

In the drawing-room, after dinner Mrs. Ffrench sat apart in the centre of a sofa. Her hair was brushed flat on her forehead; it touched her eye-

brows. She wore, as she always did, soft white muslin and pink roses; the roses arrived every day by post from the florist's. She sipped her coffee and spoke to no one.

Lady Fanny, on the hearthrug at the other side of the room, fixed her green eyes on Mrs. Ffrench, and said, half to herself and half to Esther—

"Dear 'Arriet, I suppose it's true that old Ffrench picked her up on a Bank Holiday, and that he sent her to learn deportment at one of the big shops; when she could turn round properly he married her. He was a wit and knew everybody—funny, wasn't it? He took her out sometimes, but if she talked he beat her when they got home. She has had a better time, since he died, with the good-natured Pinker. Of course, since Rouse dedicated those sonnets to 'Her Divine Sulkiness,' she has become absurdly pleased with herself, and pouts day and night."

Lady Fanny always said whatever she happened to be thinking about any one who was present, and this generally in a loud voice. Sometimes people heard her and sometimes they did not. She seldom looked at the person to whom she was speaking, but she fixed her eyes on Esther as she added, "She's besotted about Robin just now, but then we all are."

Esther smiled.

"How can I feel surprised?" she answered.

Miss Humber was leaning back in her chair; she fidgeted with her shoulders, and pushed one or other of them out beyond the edge of her low bodice. She was looking intently at one of her pretty feet. She seemed always to be actively conscious of some portion of her body. Lady Fanny nodded in her direction.

"She doesn't care for Robin; she's indecently devoted to Pearson. She always glares at the object of her infatuation. Some people say that Pearson has been made to blush by her, but I can't believe that."

Esther turned her eyes from Miss Humber to Lady Fanny.

"Have you known them long?"

"If you mean the women, I don't know them. Robin has foisted them on Dixon, and I have seen them there. You know Robin's way—next year he'll drop Dixon because he meets these people at his place."

Esther laughed.

When the men came in from the dining-room Pearson flung himself down in a chair by Miss Humber and grumbled in an undertone.

"For all the world as if they were married," said Lady Fanny. "They'll soon have that look of com-

plete detachment from each other only to be seen on the faces of married people."

"Don't you think her handsome?" Miss Humber was saying.

"Handsome? Yes, of course," said Pearson irritably. "Who cares for handsome? It's temperament that makes a woman interesting. Who cares a fig for a woman who never would, never could under any circumstances, stand on her head?"

"As to that, I'm not sure that you're fair to her," said Miss Humber dreamily. "It's her want of intelligence that I can't stand; it's quite impossible to think of anything to say to her."

Twining lounged up to Esther with his hands in his pockets.

"You must have heard a lot about me from Robin. I was surprised when they told me he was married; we none of us ever thought he'd marry. I say, I wish you'd sit to me; I should do something splendid."

"Don't believe anything he says," interrupted Lady Fanny, who had not moved from Esther's side. "He's the most beguiling person. Have you seen his last picture?"

Twining turned away. Lady Fanny laughed. "Nursemaids have a fatal fascination for him, and connected with that picture there's a very aggres-

sive one, of whom our pallid friend would rather not be reminded. He talks to the creatures in Kensington Gardens, and it ends in a breach of promise or some other action, doesn't it?"

Robin, who had joined them, replied—

"Dear old Twining, he shall have his simple pleasures. His modesty is amazing. I really don't believe, though, that he is intellectually capable of understanding his own talent. Talent!—it's pure genius! Genius puts up in the queerest quarters; I don't understand it."

Robin had begun his sentence flippantly; he ended it seriously with knit brows.

"Oh, yes, I do," he continued after a moment's silence. "This is the key to the problem; it is only the prig that genius abhors. You may meet the prig of talent every day, the prig of genius never."

Robin turned a radiant face towards the two girls who were listening to him. His looks wandered from them all round the room. Mrs. Ffrench caught his eye and beckoned to him, and moved from the middle of the sofa to one side.

"Really," said Lady Fanny crossly, "that woman wants to monopolise you. She had you to herself all dinner-time; you might talk to us now."

"It's immensely kind of her not to be tired of me."

Robin crossed the room and sank down on the sofa in the space that Mrs. Ffrench had left for him.

"Just as Robin was beginning to be interesting. But it's always like that, in scraps, though he'll sit and talk rot to that idiot for the rest of the evening. I shall go to bed," said Lady Fanny. She nodded to Esther and walked away towards the door, passing with undulating grace between the people and the furniture.

Robin's guests approved of his house and of the arrangements made for them. Robin said that as long as he had the library to himself and no one came there unless he asked them, he shouldn't mind if there were twice as many of them about the place.

Miss Pinker did her own work and attended to Mrs. Ffrench.

"You're not to bully the poor girl. Remember, she's my visitor," Robin said.

Miss Humber was absorbed in her own person and in Pearson; when he talked she made notes in a pocket-book.

Mr. Lionel Rouse appeared to consider that Mrs. Ffrench was his own creation, and contemplated her silently for hours.

Twining, who had been ill and who never admitted that he was well, wandered from room to room

and from window to window with his hands in his pockets. Sometimes he made beautiful little black and white studies of single figures or of the changing groups of men and women in the big rooms. He seldom went out of doors; he never thought the weather fine enough. He ate voraciously, and grew more white and puffy every day.

Maurice Stokes, with his eyes fixed on the ground, walked up and down for exercise between the house and the lodge gates; he was understood to despise the country almost more than anything else.

Lady Fanny held herself aloof. She had so much tact that she could say disagreeable things to people whilst at the same time she kept them at a distance. Esther was pleased that Robin was so gay. No one spoke much to her or listened to what she said. She led a detached life, and frequently rode over to Wistons, starting after breakfast and returning in time for dinner. Miss Pinker, in search of "copy," sometimes walked with her to the schools and cottages.

"How can you think of anything to say to them?" she asked. "But I ought to try and accustom myself to this kind of thing, for some day I might have to live in the country myself."

One day Betty insisted that Esther, who was at Wistons, should ride home early because black clouds were rolling up, and she was sure the storm would burst soon and last till night.

Esther was caught in the rain; she was wet through before she reached Alding. She rode her horse into the stable-yard, dismounted there, and ran into the house by a side door. As she crossed the gallery to go to her room she saw Lady Fanny's gown flutter in at the door of the library.

"Robin can't be working, as he's not alone. I'll see if he'd like tea there with us," she thought as she changed her clothes. She whistled a little tune as she ran down the wide staircase and across the hall. When she opened the door she saw Robin lying on the sofa; Lady Fanny was kneeling on the floor behind him kissing his hair. She was counting. Esther heard her say, "Forty-five, forty-six." Esther's heart felt red-hot, hammered upon; sparks from it flew up to her brain. Some bewildering, horrible emotion that she had never felt before confused her; out of it flashed clear, concentrated hatred of Lady Fanny.

Lady Fanny rose to her feet, Esther crossed the room and sprang at her. She gripped her by the shoulders and pushed her violently backwards against a heavy table. Lady Fanny's face was pal-

lid, every freckle showed clearly, her eyes shone like green gems. It all passed in a moment. Robin's surprise was so great that he sat on the edge of the sofa staring at them. No one had spoken a word. Esther stepped back, still staring at the other woman, she looked as if she might spring at her again. Robin jumped up and went to her and held her hands and said softly, "Esther, Esther."

Esther was unconscious of his presence, her eyes were aflame, fixed on Lady Fanny.

"Go, go," she said, wrenching her hands from Robin's grasp and pointing to the door; "if I see you again I will kill you."

"Esther, Esther," murmured Robin.

"I will kill you," she repeated.

Lady Fanny was recovering, mechanically she arranged her hair with her hands; she walked to the door. There she turned and spoke to Robin.

"You should tell people you had married a savage and a spy before you ask them to stay with you."

She opened wide the door and walked out; Robin left Esther for a moment and closed it. He came back and forced her gently into a chair. She was quite quiet and seemed not to know that he was there, but when he touched her again she put out her hand in a preoccupied way and pushed him

from her. He withdrew a pace or two and waited, but she sat so long without movement, staring straight in front of her, that he came near again, and kneeling down put his arm around her. She did not stir. He continued to call her by her name and once she turned and looked at him. Suddenly it was Robin who showed emotion.

"What can I do?" he said; "surely you know, you must know that nothing on earth matters to me but you! I, who only really live through you! who married you because you seemed the divinest creature I had ever seen."

Esther was listening.

"Was that enough?" she asked.

"Enough!" he answered, his voice hoarse and broken, "love not enough! Oh Esther, it is the one perfect good, the one thing certain! If you would only believe it and rest in it! Don't mix it up with hate and vindictiveness. How horrible this has been! I did not know there could be anything so horrible. If I had to suffer often in this way, through you, it would kill me!"

Esther put her hand up to her forehead. "It is all confusion," she said. She looked at him with clear, brilliant eyes: "I can give you up, that might be best for both of us; we were mistaken."

"No—never, never; it would kill me."

"That might not matter, we all must die."

"But not so senselessly. What, die! You and I with life before us to do what we like with! with our happiness in our own hands!"

"Is it?" she asked, and pointing to the door added, "and hers?"

"Oh, Fanny—she's all right, if you'll only be a little sorry for her."

"I am sorry for her, if that is enough."

"Well, don't be too sorry for her either; I'll give her a good talking to."

Esther looked at him curiously. She rose and went to his desk and wrote a few words on a sheet of paper and gave it him to read. "I shall stay upstairs this evening and you will leave after breakfast to-morrow."

"Just as you like, darling," Robin said slowly, looking at Esther as she stood there looking at him. "I'll give it her myself; I'll take her for a walk and give it to her out of doors."

Esther left the room without speaking again. Robin rang the bell and gave orders that Lady Fanny should be told that he would be waiting for her in the hall when she was ready to go out. In a few minutes she came gliding down the stairs; her face was yellow and shrunken, but she giggled when she saw him, and said aloud—

"What has become of that beast?"

"Hush, hush," said Robin; "no profanity."

The rain had ceased, and Esther, standing at her window, saw them walking briskly down the drive, two black figures against the ragged, stormy, sun-stained sky. She sighed and sat down by the fire; she stared at the friendly and familiar flames till her sight became fixed and indistinct; she had to shake her head to detach her gaze from them. Esther was fascinated by fire; she could watch it, as she had watched breaking waves upon the Lido shore, until she was scarcely aware of a separate conscious existence.

She leaned back and shut her eyes, and later opened them with a start, to find Robin standing before her dressed for dinner.

She looked up at him and said, "How glad I am not to be coming down to-night! I don't think I can ever speak to any of these people again."

Robin answered cheerfully—

"They shall all have the sack to-morrow if they bore you."

Esther dined in her sitting-room; afterwards she opened the doors between the rooms and walked up and down them, sometimes she stood still on the hearthrug and gazed at the pointed flames. It was very late when she closed the doors, piled wood

on the fire, turned out the lamp, and went to bed.

There was talking in the corridor outside. Pearson said, in his fat, surprised voice, "My dear fellow, I've said it to hundreds: 'Now will you or won't you? because I cannot waste my time.'"

Robin laughed and answered—

"That's not my way; thank God, I'm a sentimentalist."

He laughed to himself several times while he was undressing.

Esther lay awake watching the firelight flicker on the ceiling. She thought of Wistons, of the lives of her father and mother, mere links between two generations. She thought of Rhoda, who had gone away and did not want her any more. She thought of herself, and cried. How lonely she was! how unnecessary! If she died who would care? Robin? She left the question unanswered. Her mother? Vaguely for a short time. Betty? Betty would have another tombstone on her mind.

She thought again of Robin; of the lovely look upon his face when first she turned her head and saw him; of his dull, heavy face after they had been alone for a few weeks. And then she thought of him as he sat, flushed and boisterous, at

the head of his table with these guests on either side. The scene in the library rose up before her, and suddenly her heart bounded, her cheeks flamed, and she beat her clenched fists upon the bedclothes. "No, no, not that!"

As she grew drowsy she thought of the long-unremembered days in Venice.

"They were kind and pleasant in Venice, they liked me. But I think they were only outsides of people—pretty, nice outsides. I don't believe I want to see them again."

Then, half dreaming, she seemed to float away on to the wide lagoons, and so floating she slept, when the fire was dead and the dawn was rousing men and women from the familiar miracle of another night to the familiar miracle of another day.

She dressed and breakfasted upstairs; luncheon was brought to her, and still she waited, expecting Robin to come and tell her that Lady Fanny had gone away. She tried to ignore an inner conviction that Lady Fanny would not go away.

Sometimes the sound of laughter in the hall below reached her, or she heard voices and light running footsteps in the corridor outside her room. Her tragic humour wore into peevishness as the lonely hours passed, and she resented Robin's easy acceptance of her absence.

She rolled her handkerchief into a ball and flung it at the fire just as Robin came in cheery and active, with bright, animated eyes. He stood before her.

"I was afraid of disturbing you, so I've been waiting all the morning to consult you about Fanny."

"Then she has not gone!" said Esther, choking back a sudden, stifling rage.

"It seemed so stupid that she should go; it was all a silly mistake yesterday and I've given her a lecture. Poor girl, she hates going home. Oh, Esther, don't have all this dreadful, deadly, dismal business, it's too depressing. Why not a little elasticity? Let us all be happy and leave one another alone. This horrid Christian habit of inventing sins for every one! I tell you I don't understand it! I don't know what is meant by it."

Robin was frowning; it was a bewildered frown, and he looked at Esther with the puzzled, questioning expression of one trying to understand something beyond his own range of experience.

Esther struck out wildly and petulantly. "It is you who invent sins when it suits you—poaching, for instance!"

"My dearest," said Robin, his face lighting up, "that is quite different. There must be law and

order and the protection of ourselves and our property against violence and disorder. Don't be so unreasonable, it's not a bit like you; you were meant to be kind and gentle and merry, but here you sit mooning and brooding over imaginary evils until you see everything topsy-turvy from some half-crazy standpoint of your own that I can make nothing of."

Esther stared at Robin. He seemed an immeasurable distance off; he could not hear or understand her if she spoke, and there was a buzzing, confusing noise in her ears. She began to shake and feel weak, and she sat down, still staring at Robin.

"Don't look like that, Esther! Are you ill? You frighten me."

He took her cold hands and held them, tight and warm, between his own. She felt a sudden weakening of all her forces; she longed to lay her head on his shoulder and cry. She began to wish that all those people downstairs—Lady Fanny, every one—would like her, would wish her to be with them, would miss her when she was away.

"You little fool," said Robin, giving her a gentle shake, "of course I don't want you to come down if you are going to drag Fanny about the house by the hair of her head. I never saw the

natural Billingsgate in woman more artistically displayed. Still, if you are going to repeat yesterday's performance, why, Fanny must go."

"You have no right to speak of it so lightly," said Esther angrily.

"Oh, It!" he exclaimed. "The only thing to do is to treat It lightly! You don't expect me to treat It seriously for ever, do you? To go about with my eyes rolled up, shuddering when the library is mentioned? Naturally I treated it seriously yesterday when I thought you would murder that silly little idiot. Just try to think no more about it. Nothing can come between you and me —we settled that long ago. Don't grudge the poor little Fannies their little hour or so."

"But I do!" said Esther with flashing eyes, stamping her foot.

Robin got up and stood before her.

"Jealousy is the most absurd bourgeois business going. It will be as extinct as the Dodo in another generation. Othello's jealousy will be explained in footnotes, and laborious German professors will write treatises upon it which nobody will understand."

There was half a minute's silence before Robin spoke again.

"Fanny is a little idiot, she constantly annoys

me. She has the most abominable manners, like all her class. There's no moral and no intellectual difference, only a geographical and financial division, between Belgravia and Whitechapel. Just wait till I have finished my novel! Ah, if you were only really interested in my work how petty and unimportant all these other things would seem!"

Robin looked down gloomily and sighed. Esther felt worn out. What was the use of discussing anything with Robin when he demolished her arguments in that calm, reasonable voice? Often in the back of her mind she half agreed with him until some surging, overpowering instinct swept like a spring tide over her, and destroyed Robin's reasoning and her own agreement with it and left her soul bare, clinging desperately to a few principles that she could scarcely account for, and that perhaps she owed originally to Betty. Sitting there, she went through the whole process in a moment of time.

Before Robin could speak again she had sprung to her feet.

"Oh, what does anything matter! I will come downstairs!"

Robin's face glowed with satisfaction and sweetness. "You darling—you perfectly adorable darling! Dixon has come; you'll get on with him.

There's a priggish side to you which will respond at once to old Dixon." Robin laughed. "He shall sit by you at dinner, and no one else shall dare to speak to you. Dixon does know how to behave; we'll keep him on and clear out all the others, and then we'll invite the most important of the local bores, male and female, and the Bishop, and get some people to jig to them—a fatuous Front Bench man from each side, a pompous Positivist, a strident Q.C., with a few members of the Athenæum thrown in at random. Good Lord! what a prospect! I know them all and 'imagination boggles' at it. Or, if you prefer, we will do what is expected of us and keep open house for idiots who shoot and hunt. Well, goodbye for the present, but I'll come up and have tea with you, if you'll let me know, and I'll bring Dixon with me."

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Bennet Dixon was of middle height, alert and upright in figure. He wore a pince-nez across a sharp, inquisitive nose, he had small features, and his lips were frequently pursed up. His mind was like a garden wherein nothing has ever grown, but which is crowded with plants stuck into the ground in pots. Such as it was he cultivated it assiduously, and he knew a good deal about many things. A very high opinion of himself and a peppery temper added, as years went by, to the dignity of demeanour which was his originally. He was good-natured, he lived up to his own standard of conduct, and he neither felt very deeply nor really understood anything that he knew.

Every year he went to Italy for six weeks and visited one of the great cities and several of the smaller ones. In Italy he studied Dante with a professor; sometimes he closed his eyes and quoted him.

He had looked on Ruskin as a safe, infallible guide until one day he met Robin and listened to his theories. He was so much impressed that he almost abandoned the convictions of a lifetime;

later he decided that art and literature were many-sided: "One must not be narrow," he said, and ceased to be exclusive. In addition to a taste for literature, painting, and music, he now cultivated breadth of mind.

Many cultured, serious members of the aristocracy valued him exceedingly as a friend and exponent. He accompanied them to concerts, to the National Gallery, and to the British Museum; he met parties of them on the Continent, and escorted them to museums and picture galleries; he wrote out lists of books for them to read.

Mr. Dixon lived in a flat; the walls were covered with Morris paper. In the drawing-room were photographs in narrow black frames of the pictures of Burne-Jones; on a bracket was a small model in terra-cotta of the Venus of Melos; over his writing-table hung the death mask of Beethoven. Here, at tea-time, he received his friends in sets that were carefully selected, and that had the appearance of being impromptu. He visited a good deal, and was welcome in many great houses, where he gave forth in neat phrases much of the information that it delighted him to acquire. His curiosity was insatiable; he would have stopped in the middle of a crossing at a hint that the sweeper could tell him something about some one that he knew.

As Mr. Dixon walked along the corridor, after leaving Robin and Esther, Lady Fanny was coming up the stairs. She flopped down on the top step and stretched up her arm to shake hands with him. "Have you seen her?" she asked. "Now don't say that she's handsome, because it's too obvious. Brains never go with that appearance, that dreadful knock-you-down sort of good looks that leaves nothing to the imagination. But just fancy Robin having come such a cropper! He's afraid of her. She nags at him all the time, and she has the devil's own temper into the bargain."

"Are you not a little hard on her?"

"You think you detect feminine spite, do you?"

"No, no, not a bit, but I have known you to be severe in your judgments."

"I'll say no more about her; I see it's no use. Those dark eyes have not looked into yours for nothing." Here Lady Fanny suddenly giggled; she often ended a sentence with a giggle. "Anyway, I'm thankful you've come. The creatures here are too appalling; you've no notion how they behave. Miss Humber murmurs, 'Give me passion'—you don't believe it?—and glares indecently at Pearson. Mrs. Ffrench counts the words that Robin speaks to me and looks like an allegori-

cal presentment of 'Murder, by the East End gone West, painted and presented to the nation by G. F. Watts, Esq., R.A.'" Dixon laughed. "Then there's the Pinker. Why have I to meet the Pinker? Robin is like Poverty; he acquaints you with strange bedfellows."

"Poor Miss Pinker!"

"Oh, if you say, 'Poor Miss Pinker,' I shall drop you. Now be sympathetic or I shall die!"

Dixon laughed again.

"The men don't matter, one expects to meet queer men. Pearson, as usual, is innocently unconscious of his own obscenity. Stokes hasn't burst yet, I wish he would. Rouse! Oh heavens, the preposterousness of Rouse! And Twining! Twining is unspeakable!"

"Twining is a genius."

"Well, not even genius can excuse the obtrusive horrors of his personality. What must people say? When they call I keep out of the way, but these things troop in and sit and stare! Can't you imagine the scene?"

Lady Fanny giggled again; she spoke in her usual loud, rather guttural voice. Dixon had in vain tried to make her lower its tones. "Oh, no one ever hears me, and I don't care a dump if they do."

A door was opened downstairs: Dixon looked at his watch.

"Time to dress for dinner."

Lady Fanny stood up; she nodded her head and sighed.

"I'm really thankful you've come," she said, looking over her shoulder at him as she went away towards her own room.

Esther was charmed with Dixon; to her inexperience his platitudes seemed wisdom; his inquisitiveness, sympathy. His politeness won her confidence; she liked him to ask her questions and listen with attention to her answers; she propounded to him theories of her own, she even talked to him of Robin. He asked to be allowed to accompany her to the village and suggested a visit to the schools. Esther, looking at him gratefully as they were walking home, said—

"Until I married Robin I only knew people in books, and poor people; I can't live near these and not go and see them often; I'm ashamed to appear so important in their eyes. Miss Saunders and I hope the children's clubs will survive their school-days and develop in all sorts of directions. There hasn't been time yet, and I am in such a hurry I have hardly patience for details; I see everything

on such an immense scale; it's almost blinding. You are good to listen to me." Esther's face was eagerly, childishly grave.

"It is I who am grateful to you for allowing me to come with you this afternoon; it has been most interesting, most interesting. In London one is hooked on to none of the realities of life; sometimes one really misses them."

They walked on for a minute or two in silence till Esther said impulsively—

"Mr. Dixon, isn't Robin wonderful?" She was longing to hear him praised—longing for boundless, unqualified praise of him. Dixon stood still and said impressively—

"I think Robin is quite extraordinary, phenomenal. I believe that his genius is absolutely original, epoch-making. Let me add that he is marvellously fortunate to have a wife who understands him and who is willing to give up her own wishes for his."

Esther listened with rapture and contrition.

"Think of being able to help him! It is the answer to all my aspirations."

"It is very charming that you feel it in this way; but allow me to give you a word of advice: you are very young, don't take life too seriously. I'm not sure, I really am not quite sure," he spoke

playfully, "that you should give way in everything to Master Robin; though indeed it is most difficult to know what is best for him. But don't let him be too exacting: I think I may safely say so much."

"Exacting? But if he is exacting he will pay back to every one so much more than he will ever take from them."

"Of course, of course," said Dixon in hearty agreement.

"I'm sure nothing is worse for him than to be depressed. Sometimes, when we are alone, he is not as you see him now, so gay and happy and writing for hours every day."

Dixon looked anxious; he worshipped talent, he was certain that Robin had genius. "Ah then, keep up his spirits at any cost," he said emphatically.

"I will try, indeed I will try. It is a great responsibility and one makes such mistakes. The other evening," she continued, shy and blushing, "when some of them were acting, it struck me that life is an amateur performance—no rehearsals, inappropriate scenery, and unpractised players."

Dixon sighed sympathetically.

"Very prettily put, my dear Mrs. Yaldwyn,

very. But we must not look at things too seriously; for although I make a point of not ignoring the deeper side of everything, death and—and all that, still I have never allowed myself to take a morbid view of life."

Robin met them in the portico. "She's very haughty and exclusive; has she shown you any of her nasty temper? I'm hoping that I shall rise in her estimation through you, so keep in her good books."

Dixon smiled. "My dear boy, I've had a most interesting walk, and the schools——"

"Oh, if you've passed safely through the Ordeal by Schools you're all right for the present, but be careful, be careful."

"Robin has a theory that I bore every one with the schools and the schoolmistress; he ought to know better, for I never mention them to him."

"My darling, nothing you say could bore me. Now she's pretending she has no sense of humour."

"Oh, you silly old Robin!" said Esther as she slipped past him and ran into the house.

"Queer business, isn't it, this English country life?" said Robin turning to Dixon with a shrewd expression flashing across his face. "The landed interest at the top of things, respectfully supported

by the dear old pumpkin-headed Church, so true to the comfortable traditions of her inglorious past, and both depending on the happy peasant whose rustic recreations—beer and babies, and plenty of both—keep him contented and England great and free. And there are idiots who think they are going to close the public-houses and stop the boys and girls from going up the lanes together after dark. They'll do no harm, for they won't succeed. It's all right as far as I can see, and my insight is extraordinary, as you know. It's wonderful how human nature adjusts itself to circumstances all the world over."

"Yes, human nature," said Dixon in a tone that was at once solemn and indulgent; "we must make great allowance for human nature." He smiled and patted Robin on the back. "There never was any one like you, Robin, you must never alter in any way. And let me tell you that she's a very charming creature."

"Adorable. Now come in and listen to what I've written since luncheon. You'll be staggered."

They went in to the library and Dixon listened and emphasized his approbation—

"By Jove, my dear boy, you're even more wonderful than I've said you were!"

"I should rather think so," was Robin's answer; "you just wait."

That evening after dinner Dixon stood for a moment at the drawing-room door and looked around.

Miss Humber sat in a low chair, and either crossed her arms and gently stroked them or played with her rings and bracelets.

Lady Fanny, her back to the other women, talked volubly to Esther, who listened and sometimes laughed.

Mrs. Ffrench, upright on a high-backed chair, turned over the leaves of an uncut magazine.

Miss Pinker was yawning at the further end of the room. Dixon crossed over and sat down beside her; he remembered that he had had no conversation with her since he had been at Alding. Miss Pinker smiled.

"That's right. I've been waiting to discuss the situation with you; it's curious and rather complicated."

Dixon raised his eyebrows in interrogation. "Give me your point of view."

"Well then, I rather like her," waving her hand towards Esther; "I think she has a most interesting face; I like watching her and wondering what she's thinking about."

"Ah, exactly."

"Now how much longer do you suppose we're all going to stay here? She doesn't want us, though she's getting more used to us, and is certainly more civil since you came. But she doesn't count one way or the other, and I suppose we shall just stop till Robin turns us out. I call him Robin when Mrs. F. can't hear, she doesn't allow it. He doesn't look very pleased with us to-night, and some fine morning he'll tell us all to go, and there isn't one of us that will resent it. No one has any pride where Robin is concerned; I wish they had, and then I should have slept better last night. But I sat up till the small hours with Mrs. F., and she sat up because she believed that Robin was sitting up with Lady Fanny."

"And was he?" asked Dixon, opening his eyes wide with surprise, and glancing across the room at Lady Fanny and Esther.

"I'm sure I neither know nor care. I got Mrs. F. to bed by 3 a.m. and locked her into her room. It was too early to raise the house. I'm prepared for scenes at home, but here—no, really it would be impossible. I wish Robin had not asked us all down together; we're so jealous, you know. Couldn't you say something to him? It's not for me to judge, but couldn't even Robin go too far? I mean for manners, I'm not speaking of morals,

of course." Her pretty pink face dimpled as she spoke. "Now please tell me, isn't even a genius bound to consider manners to some extent? You know all about these things and I'm so ignorant. You're quite sure he is a genius, I hope? for I never met one before, and I'm pinning my faith on your knowledge. Sometimes I've said to myself, 'Suppose after all he were merely an ass.' Robin an ass! How funny it sounds! And no doubt the standard of manners for an ass is rather high?"

Robin was now in the drawing-room; he had drunk a good deal of wine, and looked cross and gloomy. He sprawled on a low chair with his legs stretched out; he balanced one patent-leather shoe on a silk-socked foot. Mr. Dixon looked at him and frowned and muttered something about its being certainly possible to go too far. Miss Pinker's smile grew more radiant.

"Dear Robin," she said, "how I wish I was in love with him! It's hard to be almost the only woman who is not! But, Mr. Dixon, you are not listening to me! Do pray remember that we are the only spectators here and attend to what I say."

"I hope you are mistaken in what you say, or insinuate, for, unless you are, the play is not pretty and should certainly not be performed."

"Shouldn't it really? Any way some of the

characters in the piece are almost rudimentary in their simplicity. Look at Mrs. F. now, she's merely, frankly——"

Miss Pinker giggled behind her fan. Dixon, who hated coarseness, looked annoyed.

"A nice time I shall have with her to-night." She stopped short; Dixon was too inquisitive to be dignified.

"Why, what will she do?" he asked.

"Do? Tear up and down and abuse Lady Fanny, and then she'll begin to cry, only I shall stop that at once by telling her she'll be a fright to-morrow."

"How idiotic! Does she think of nothing else but Robin?"

"Nothing," said Miss Pinker gaily.

"But what did she think of before she knew him?"

"Really I can't speculate about that, the present is enough for me."

"Has she no sense?"

"Oh dear no, none. That is what attracted Robin, you know. She was quite wonderful, he said, stuck up in the middle of a sofa like a beautiful red idol with its hair combed into its eyes. It's wonderful how anything Robin says dazzles you."

"Why did he not marry her?"

"Oh, no one marries her. Why did he marry any one is more to the point."

"He's so young," said Dixon indulgently, looking affectionately at Robin.

Miss Pinker continued: "He used to catalogue her: 'She is—she is greedy and selfish and idle and a liar. She can't speak grammatically, and she has a Whitechapel accent that she tries to conceal, and she is absolutely divine.' I grew enthusiastic too; I saw her with an electro-plated halo round her head. Of course Robin penetrated all the mysteries: 'What! whiskey and red herrings! how perfect! To walk in the Park when the fashionable world that she did not know was there! how original!' He would start off with her as if they were going on a voyage of adventure, while I waved to them all down the street. But it didn't continue at that rate, and Ariadne, deserted as usual, consoled herself with Bacchus. There's a picture of it in Venice, but it's not a bit like the real thing—not a bit, I assure you."

"Mrs. Ffrench is a perfect fool," said Dixon.

"Is she? Do tell me, oughtn't she to be taking up with some one else now? And if it's all so simple and necessary as they say, why make so much fuss about it?" Miss Pinker again hid her face

and giggled. Dixon looked disgusted and said nothing.

Miss Pinker closed her fan and tapped him with it. "Now don't be cross with me, I'm all right; I'm the pastrycook's boy who sees so many sweets he don't eat any. I'm going away some day, when I've made enough money to buy my young man a living. You didn't know I had a young man?" Miss Pinker blushed and looked shyly at Dixon. "He's a curate down in Devonshire; I never let him come to the Mansions; I tell him I'm companion to a widow lady and that no followers are allowed."

Dixon burst out laughing, and Miss Pinker laughed too till she became hysterical.

Lady Fanny and Robin were walking up and down the terrace in front of the windows that caught the morning sun and glittered in long rows.

"Don't be a fool," said Robin gently; "you know as well as I do that you're perfectly happy without me. You can make yourself disagreeable enough to people, it's one of the things I like in you, so for Heaven's sake don't be maudlin over me. I want the house cleared, and you will have to go with the rest; I'm sick and tired of all these people."

"So you ought to be; they're utterly disgusting.

I wouldn't have come if I'd known what I was to meet."

"I'm sure I told you."

"I'm sure you didn't. I never had such a time in my life. I must stay on after they're gone to recover. Send the women off, at any rate, they're not decent."

"Oh, the women are all right if they'd only behave themselves."

"But they can't. That Humber woman with her Pearson and her religion and her divorces is a scandal. I won't travel with them, so that's flat."

"Well, then, if you won't go to-day or to-morrow, you can go up to-night after dinner by the 10.10 train and be home soon after midnight."

Lady Fanny turned her back to the house and stamped her foot. "You know I should be frightened to death alone in a train at night."

"Then wire for your maid."

"She shan't come here making friends with your creatures."

"Oh, that kind of nonsense I can't follow. Servants are servants, I don't care what they hear or see."

"Well, I do, and so does the pater. He has always said he would have no scandals, and has been so careful himself, poor old dear. He shan't be

agitated at his age. He's as shaky as old Harry."

"I know," exclaimed Robin; "she can come down by the 7.2 and wait for you at the station. I'll go down to the village and send the message at once."

"How practical you can be when it suits you!"

"I'm always practical."

"Robin," said Lady Fanny in a coaxing voice, "are you going to live down in this hole altogether for the rest of your life? It doesn't suit you a bit."

"That shows how little you know, for it suits me exactly. I must have space. Buckingham Palace would be all right, but to live up a chicken ladder! no, thank you."

"Oh, nonsense; there's everybody else's house to add to your own, and a hansom is bigger than a county. She can stay here and surround herself with frumps and poke round the village and patronise the schoolmistress; she can't speak of her without tears in her eyes."

"Keep to your own affairs and leave mine alone," said Robin, in soft tones.

Lady Fanny pouted.

"Robin, you are fond of me, aren't you?"

"How often do you wish me to tell you so, at

inopportune moments? How can you expect me to be fond of you when you are so disagreeable and inconsiderate?"

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I'm not going to tell you again."

"Very well, then, I'll go up to-night."

Robin's face brightened. "Now you're nice again, and I'll go and arrange everything."

"There she is, in the drawing-room," said Lady Fanny, waving her hand. "I'll go in and devote myself to her, and most likely you'll meet us in the village near the schools; in fact, you'd better meet us and go too, it will be most edifying."

Lady Fanny giggled and ran across the grass to the house.

Esther and Lady Fanny met Robin coming from the village shop and post-office, with big parcels of sweets. The little schoolmistress smiled and bowed and bridled as she said—

"It is not in order, but it would be impossible to refuse Mr. Yaldwyn on his first visit."

Robin called up the children one by one and filled their hands. He made them a little speech, he made a speech to Miss Saunders, the schoolroom resounded with chuckling, bucolic, childish laughter; round, unblinking eyes were fixed upon

his face. Miss Saunders looked at him with respectful, smiling admiration.

Out of doors Robin laughed gaily—

"How nice the little brats are," he said, "learning all they ought to do that later on they may do all they oughtn't, and no mistake about it."

"Robin," said Esther, "you were too delightful! how happy you made them!"

"Don't I make everybody happy?"

"They liked you better than the sweets, they like the sweets ever so much better than me."

"Mrs. Yaldwyn," said Lady Fanny, "where's Mr. Dixon?"

"In his own room, I suppose, as he wasn't at breakfast."

"Dixon's gone," said Robin gently; "he talked a lot of nonsense last night, and I told him so, and he turned pompous, and was off before any one was down this morning."

"Really," said Esther, "I'm very sorry."

"Silly old Dixon! he had the impudence to say I didn't properly appreciate you. I told him it was sickening that any one could imagine such things."

Esther stared with surprise, and Lady Fanny laughed.

"He's a dear old thing, and he can't help being ridiculous," continued Robin.

"I'm sorry he's gone," Esther said again.

"It's all right; he knows that I never quarrel with any one; I'd forgotten it already. I'm very fond of old Dixon; he's splendid on his dignity, he does it to perfection."

Lady Fanny in evening dress, enveloped in wraps, drove to the station after dinner. Robin went with her and found her maid, cross and cold, in the waiting-room. He got the ticket and sped her into the train with great briskness, and flung himself into the brougham and drove home again.

The next day the others left after luncheon. Robin found Esther upstairs and said, "Come along and say goodbye, they're just going." He drew her arm through his, and as they walked together down the broad staircase the group waiting in the hall turned to look at them.

"Quite baronial," said Mrs. Ffrench with a sneer.

"Quite what?" said Miss Humber with a languid stare. It was the first time she had spoken to Mrs. Ffrench since they had been together at Alding.

"Was it a stupid thing of me to say?" Mrs. Ffrench asked Miss Pinker later, and Miss Pinker answered that she really did not know.

Robin walked to the station with Pearson, the rest of the party drove.

"It's scarcely decent to look so pleased that we are going," said Twining; "I wanted to stay till I had quite recovered from my last attack of influenza, but I saw you wouldn't like it."

"No, that I shouldn't," said Robin with a laugh; "you are more clear-sighted and considerate than I supposed."

When he returned Robin found Esther in her sitting-room. "I wanted to get back quickly to you, so I drove," he exclaimed. "Thank Heavens, the house is cleared and I have you all to myself! What shall we do to celebrate our freedom? We'll have a little honeymoon, our real little honeymoon; that other doesn't count, there were too many people in it. We'll give dinner-parties to each other, and you shall wear your prettiest frocks for no one but for me."

"Yes," she said, "and I won't be at one end of the table and you at the other. We'll sit together in the middle, like a king and queen in a picture-book."

"We will, with no one opposite us!"

"We'll pick every one to pieces and throw away the bits!" she cried, and clapped her hands.

Within a fortnight Robin had reorganised the household on what he called a good working basis. He neither spoke nor was spoken to until teatime. Esther forgot former experiences, the arrangements seemed to be final. They had lasted a month, and one evening Robin lay on a sofa in the drawing-room looking dull and ill. He was so preoccupied with himself that he was blind and deaf to everything else. Esther had spoken to him and he had not heard, but when she touched his hand he started up and put his arm round her and drew her down to sit beside him.

"My darling, it is very bad for us to be so long alone together; we end by stultifying each other, by thinking each other's thoughts. I must see people who are of less consequence, less vital to me than you are!"

"Let us go away. Oh, Robin, I want to see Rhoda, I ought to see Rhoda; she hardly ever writes now!"

"Just now we should defeat our object if we went away together. I will go to-morrow and you shall join me a little later. Just think of the delight of meeting again! I realise it already. Say you will be glad! Say it!"

Esther said nothing.

"As I must go," he continued, after a pause,

"the sooner the better. I must attack my work from a new position; ideas are bubbling up, but they escape me here. If I don't get a change it will be fatal to the whole scheme. I daren't risk it by an hour's delay."

Esther was silent, she looked at Robin critically and saw defects; he was not so beautiful as people said, his self-absorbed expression was ugly, it seemed to thicken his features. She got up from the sofa and stood on the hearthrug; he did not perceive that her lips were giving utterance to her thoughts—

"Go," she murmured, "I don't want you here; I hate you." But a lump rose in her throat, and tears filled her eyes; she hated herself for hating him.

"I must have the stimulus of people," he said; "we've tried having them here and it was a failure; there was too much of everybody. There's nothing like the ease and freedom of an hotel. I'm particularly anxious to see Dixon, it's quite necessary that I should see him." He looked at his watch. "I could just catch the 10.10 to-night and drop him a line to breakfast with me to-morrow; but Barton's so slow he would never pack in time, would he?"

Robin turned and saw Esther staring at him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She laughed. "Of myself, that's of whom I should be thinking, isn't it?"

Robin looked surprised, but before he could speak she had turned and left the room. On the other side of the door she clasped her hands and said—

"Oh, I wish I was a fool! Why am I not a fool?"

The next day, when Robin had gone away, Esther stood in the library looking out of the open window at the stretches of park, the clumps of trees, the fat sheep feeding on the grass. Robin's writing-table was bare, the room seemed put away, out of use. She thought of the scene there with Lady Fanny and sighed and wondered whether, if it happened now, she would care so much. She was so tired she wanted to forget. Oh, everything was intolerable! The next moment she throbbed with misery and searchings of heart.

After two days Robin telegraphed that the work was going splendidly. Esther wrote a letter in reply; when she reread it in the afternoon the sentences seemed bald and stilted, and she threw it on one side. The next morning she sat for half an hour, pen in hand, her mind a blank. She

jumped up, found the discarded letter, and sent it to the post without reading it again—

"It must go; I have nothing to say to him."

In those days Esther's actions seemed to be the outcome of some merely mechanical process of the mind, she followed a routine of meals, and walks, and rides. She knocked at cottage doors and remembered the interests and the claims of others. But her soul was a wondering, questioning spirit, remote from life and action. Was the unknown too vast for her proportions? Was she herself of great importance or of no account? Was it of no consequence that she suffered, and ought her charity to be so large that she herself was excluded from it?

Sometimes her imagination took audacious flights and nothing seemed outside her eventual comprehension. One evening, when the sun was setting, it seemed to her that she received a revelation of hidden meanings; there was great peace, her eyes shone, on her lips was a responsive smile. But as the sun sank the understanding left her, she made one strong, useless effort to retain it. She covered her face with her hands—

"But I understood; I will never forget that for one moment I understood."

Esther's moods of spiritual exaltation were intermittent, and were interrupted or succeeded by others. She was angry too, and apathetic and resentful in turn.

She did not write again to Robin. He sent her telegrams, sometimes one a week, sometimes two a day, and to each she sent a message in reply.

After the first week of his absence, letters came for Robin every day from two persistent correspondents. Esther held them in her hand—

"Why do they write every day? Why doesn't Robin tell them he is not here?"

She told Mason to send the letters on himself in future.

Mason blinked as he answered, "Yes, ma'am."

Mr. Yaldwyn's correspondence was a subject of great interest in the housekeeper's room. It was discussed there with closed doors after supper. The night before, Mason had said, "I hear Mr. Dixon call him a genius; I call him flighty. And I don't like the hocus-pocus business with these letters. Depend upon it—and you will remember my words some day—combustion will follow."

"She's a sweet young lady, if she is of lowly origin," said the housekeeper, who was sentimental, "and I'm sorry for her."

Jimpson said—

"And so am I, though I always must maintain it was most peculiar conduct to throw her things about her room as she did. But she has no nasty ways, and I'd rather tidy up after her every day than see her grown so quiet."

Mason shook his head—

"As a married man myself, I say he shouldn't go on as he does."

"We must never forget," sighed the housekeeper, "that, however deceiving appearances may be, matrimony is a sacrament."

"Well, as for me," said Jimpson, "I'd sooner fifty times die an old maid than marry a man as kept his clandestine correspondences from me."

Ten days passed without a word from Robin, Esther came down in the morning unhappy and resentful. The silver and china on the dining-room table sparkled amid fresh flowers.

"Everything shines, how hateful it all looks! I don't belong here, I am an intruder who sleeps and feeds in this house."

Esther was in her sitting-room. Her eyes were brimming over with tears; she felt so lonely, so unhappy, so much in need of human sympathy;

she leaned forward and sat with her elbows on the table and the palms of her hands pressed hard against her eyes. She felt so sorry for herself, she wished to be happy, to be kind to people, she wanted people to be fond of her. It was natural to her to give expression to her emotions, and she rose from the chair and walked up and down the room and beat her breast and clasped her hands over her head and sobbed aloud.

When her energy had worn itself out she stood still and looked round the beautiful room; the stately simplicity seemed very familiar. And as she looked her thoughts swung like a pendulum between opposing opinions—

"After all, why should I distress myself about anything while my life can be so full of ease and all I have is so delicate and lovely?"

"No, there is no reality except in the unseen, and no beauty and no rest except in the ideal.

"But Robin! Oh, I would rather stay with Robin on any terms than leave him; in future can I not go my way and let him go his?

"Impossible! what is left if we disagree about all that is essential? Life is faith and hope and charity, not fingers and toes and houses and meals."

She cried again more quietly, her thoughts became vague; she put up her hands to her head.

Heart and head felt suddenly void; thought and feeling receded to an immeasurable distance; her rage, her jealousy, her sense of personal injury died, and somewhere, far off, her soul gathered itself together and grew serious and pitiful and strong.

"Poor, foolish, mistaken creatures, all of us, myself no wiser than the rest!" she cried.

Later on she began to think of going away; but first she leaned her head upon her hand and cried quite gently for a little while.

When Esther reached Wistons and the luggage was brought into the house the strange, changed expression on her face frightened Betty.

"Oh, Miss Esther, whatever has happened?"

Esther stooped and kissed her, and then stood looking at Betty's white, scared face before she spoke—

"I've come home, Betty dear; I ought not to have gone away."

"Miss Esther, if something dreadful has happened there's only one thing we can do—pray to God for Him to help us."

Esther wrung her hands and cried out—

"Oh, Betty, if it were only that! But I think God is praying us to help Him."

PART III

ESTHER AND RHODA

CHAPTER I

THE first night after her return to Wistons Esther went to her old room and closed and locked the door; she drew back the curtains, and stood at the window looking at the woods across the lawn. She had been trying to fit back into her old place, but she could not; for the Esther who had come back this afternoon was not the same Esther who had gone away on that triumphal wedding morning. But at Wistons life revolved on its own axis and did not change. It would so revolve until Madgwick and Betty and Bella dropped one after the other into the grey sand waiting to receive them. When she was living at Alding and only came over here on visits, she had not realized that Wistons could never again hold her; she realized it to-night with a shock of surprise at the denseness of vision that had blinded her to the essential facts of her relations to this simple existence; this existence that she could understand but of which the spirit could not respond to hers. She thought of Rhoda and, in a flash, understood why she had gone: "It was impossible for her to stay; how

dull not to have seen that too!" She felt a sudden great respect for Rhoda; Rhoda would return some day to help her; but almost instantly, with a pang, she remembered that Rhoda had always been self-sufficing, and neither wanted help nor gave it.

The spiritual exaltation which Esther had experienced at Alding, which had borne her up in her resolution to come away, failed her now completely and, falling on her knees, she crossed her arms upon the window-sill, and pressed her face against them. In her utter desolation of soul, she felt that only a direct response from the Infinite could satisfy her. "But I am alone," she whispered, "no one answers me." She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and when her tears were dried she leaned her head upon her hands, and listened to the sounds that came across the lawn. She remembered that when she was a child the woods at night had seemed to hold all the world's mystery: but now it was she herself who lived and moved in mystery; mystery that was within her and around. When she went to bed, she lay trembling with an awful sense of loneliness; as if she were the only conscious intelligence in an empty universe. But the boundaries were reset when Betty came to her room the next morning

and stood at the foot of the bed, saying stiffly as she looked at her—

"We're very glad as you've come back, ma'am, and it's most right and proper that you should be here with your mamma, for as long as Mr. Yaldwyn's business keeps him away."

"Shall you mind if I stay a long time, Betty?"

"The longer the better under such circumstances," said Betty without softening.

Bella seemed pleased that Esther was there to persuade her to come out into the garden, or to talk and listen in her room: Esther's presence made Bella think of Rhoda too, and several times a day she asked when Rhoda was coming home.

Esther felt some sad self-satisfaction at the end of each long day that she had devoted to her mother, to Betty and Madgwick, and to the small duties and charities of life at Wistons. She never shut herself into her father's old library or ran off alone to the Common until she had listened to all that Betty had to say, and had asked Madgwick fifty questions which it gratified him to answer. She rode over to the school at Aldingly, but the little schoolmistress seemed embarrassed and shy, or Esther fancied it. The Dunton schoolmistress, who had known her since she was a child, was not

to be roused by her to enthusiasm for innovations of which neither she nor Mrs. Milldown had ever dreamed. The sense of her own personality weighed heavily upon her. "I wish I was a bird and did not know I was," she thought, one day when the larks were singing.

Esther had left Alding in a mood that nothing at Wistons could sustain. She needed the stimulus of resistance, of strong, overpowering emotion, of spiritual conflict and spiritual response. While she was longing to look up she had to look down upon the narrow lives that claimed her. She satisfied their claims, but she clasped her hands and cried out when she was alone, for some one to be to her what she could be to them. She tried to get back to the condition of mind which, in those last days at Alding, had made her feel in communion with God, but she tried in vain.

Esther grew sadder, realizing every day more fully that if, after all, Wistons did make claims on her, it was because she happened to be there. They could do very well without her as they did very well without Rhoda, and she wondered at the importance she had attached to her constant visits to them in the Alding days and at Betty's eagerness then to see her—whilst making calls both on her time and her attention, Betty's attitude now was

often suggestive rather of toleration than appreciation. The high, heroic mood in which Esther had come back to Wistons seemed almost ridiculous in retrospect, so insignificant, if indeed it were not reprehensible, did her presence here, now seem. Old Mr. Milldown held her hand, patting it, and looking anxious as he asked whether they could spare her much longer from Alding.

"We like you here amongst us," he said, "but we mustn't be selfish and keep you too long. It's Rhoda that we want to see back in her own place." He smiled and nodded as he walked away and went home to tell his wife. He hoped he had not been too harsh and too plain spoken?

"Oh no," she answered placidly. "Why, 'twas you that christened her if she is Mrs. Yaldwyn now. But it's a pity that young man had a foreign education."

Betty sometimes received little notes from Rhoda, bidding her do this for her, or send her that; telling her, too, that she would come when it was summer-time again, and that no one was to feel anxious about her.

"She doesn't want us, Betty," said Esther.

"Now I wouldn't say that if I was you, Miss Esther."

Robin wrote sometimes, and in his first letter he gently rallied Esther for leaving it to Mason to tell him that she was at Wistons. "He understood so well her wish to go back there, and he was coming soon to take her away for the second time." He added, that it was beautiful to think of her again in that setting. Esther answered him; she took his first letter to the Common and read it there, walking backwards and forwards with her hat in her hand, and the wind blowing the loose hair about her face. When she had read it two or three times she tore it in pieces and scraped a hole at the bottom of the tumulus and buried the bits there, surprised that she felt so little emotion. "Perhaps only my body is alive," she thought, "perhaps my soul is extinct." She went down the hill and across the Green to the churchyard, and stood looking at the three graves: of Robert Woolvenhurst, of Laetitia his wife, of George their son. What would they think of her or she of them if they met now? She stooped and touched each grave caressingly, wondering at her own nearness to, and remoteness from those that lay there. But after all they were scarcely more remote from her in death than were the two who were nearest to her in life. Robin and Rhoda seemed little less detached from her than were her dead father, and his mother and

father. She went home and questioned Betty about her grandfather Robert, of whom she had never thought before, except as identical with the name cut with many flourishes upon his tombstone.

"It almost surprises me as you have been there," said Betty, "because as a child you couldn't abide the sight of graves; it was Miss Rhoda as had quite a fondness, you might say, for them."

"Betty, am I like my grandfather or like grandmamma?" asked Esther.

Betty was almost apologetic as she shook her head.

"You see, they none of them had dark eyes," she answered; "your grandmamma's were grey, and old Mr. Woolvenhurst's were as blue as some of they china plates there used to be. 'Sussex blue eyes' I've heard them called; Madgwick has them the same like."

Betty, who loved to dwell upon the past, enjoying the theme, told her that this grandfather and grandmother had been very happy together; that their lives had run smoothly until death parted them. Esther was reminded of the solemn visits to her grandmother, whom Rhoda frankly disliked, and of her own doubts concerning her that were partially dispelled by presents of shells, and per-

mission to wind up the large musical-box that stood on a round table by itself. Esther reflected that the tenants of those graves would probably have been more alienated from her in life than she felt her own mother now to be; Bella's nature having roots in primitive passions that were common to them both, though these were in Esther balanced by some desultory knowledge picked up at random and overshadowed by an imagination that occasionally eclipsed ignorance.

As Esther listened she fixed her eyes on Betty thinking how unchanged she was, while she herself had found a new personality in Venice, at Alding, here. Here, to the primitive Esther, Robin had seemed the goal of her existence. Now she looked back and thought he was the starting-point. She seemed to meet that first Esther in many familiar places. She was an expectant person. This latest Esther believed that she expected nothing, wished for nothing. "Why do people pray? What can any one want from God?" she murmured in such a mood. But, inconsequently, Dixon flashed before her mental vision and Esther flushed angrily and stamped her foot: "He ought to have remembered me and tried to help! he pretended he was different from the others!" As Esther's selves multiplied, they jostled one another.

To Betty, a central domestic divinity was a necessity. The best possible was, of course, a baby; but lacking the best, Bella had been promoted by her to fill the vacant shrine. Round her had grown a legend of Betty's own invention. "Mrs. Woolvenhurst was not to be disturbed." "She could not be troubled." "She must be spared this or that." Betty met the maids with a finger on her lips. "Not so much noise, Mrs. Woolvenhurst may be sleeping." She surprised Madgwick by telling him not to whistle to his dog when he was within earshot of the house. She surrounded Bella with etiquette as rigid as if she had been a Queen of Spain. It is doubtful whether, in Betty's absence, had the house caught fire any one in it would have presumed to save Mrs. Woolvenhurst from the flames. Bella's look-out on life was even a little narrower than it had been when husband and children had roused storms within her breast. Betty was now the only person who ever dared to oppose her. Betty herself was growing more opinionated and stood her ground more firmly than when points at issue had been of greater consequence, and she had had to meet them with the strategy and tactics of resourceful generalship. Long habit had made Bella and Betty indispensable to each other. They quarrelled occasionally;

occasionally Bella's temper was roused to the old fury, and she screamed and raged; then Betty retired, and sulked in dignity till Bella made overtures to which Betty responded with frigidity that gradually thawed, and the old relations were resumed again.

Madgwick went his rounds giving orders, finding fault, making and receiving payments. His ways were perhaps a trifle less assertive, he was more silent, a little more disposed to come indoors in the evening and smoke a pipe in the kitchen.

"I've no fault to find with Madgwick so long as he knows his place and keeps it," Betty might be heard to say, and in recognition of the long years of common service that bound them both to Wistons, she would sometimes go in and talk to him, though she emphasised the superiority of her own rank to his by not sitting down with him, and by making some other pretext than conversation the motive for her presence. Esther, alone in the library, hearing their voices through the open doors, would feel a lump in her throat as she thought of Madgwick in the old days, grumbling and masterful. She would shut her book with a clap of the covers, and go running through the house to them. Seating herself on the edge of the solid kitchen table, she talked to them, and when she was there

Betty drew out a chair and sat down too. Then Madgwick would go back on his life's experiences, and Esther would ask the questions that she knew to be appropriate, while Betty made comments with a face expressive of intense interest, and refreshed her memory of past events at Wistons: past events elsewhere interested her not at all.

CHAPTER II

One chilly evening in late summer Esther was with Betty in the nursery. A light breeze was blowing, and the branches of the apple-tree tapped in the familiar way against the window panes. Suddenly Betty looked up and listened.

"There's something there—whatever can it be? —scratching at the glass!"

Esther listened. "It is the tree," she said.

"Yes, now, but it wasn't."

Esther smiled. "Oh, Betty, I can't believe in ghosts! There are too many that we have not seen!"

"But that, no doubt, is for our good," said Betty, as the sounds ceased, settling down again to sew. The next moment she stopped again.

"Hush! I've heard they branches against the window in all sorts of wind and weather, and there's something else besides them there to-night."

Esther stood up and listened. The boughs brushed the panes of glass irregularly, but there was also the tap of finger-tips.

"Shall I pull back the curtains?" asked Betty doubtfully, without stirring.

"No, no!" cried Esther. "I could not bear to see a face looking in out of the darkness: I would rather open the door and look out myself."

"It's not the way to be coming to a house at night," said Betty, with affected indignation and raising her voice. "If it's sickness in the village, the proper thing is to go round to the back and knock at the kitchen door: I've no patience with such ways."

Betty's voice faltered a little as she said the last words. She and Esther looked at each other for a moment in silence, then the tapping ceased and Rhoda's clear voice in minor key called out—

"Betty, Betty, open the door; we're waiting to come in!"

Esther and Betty both sprang towards the door, but Betty, with tense, excited face, pushed Esther aside and opened the door herself. The lamp in the room shone out and made a patch of light up in the air and down on the gravel path. Beyond the light stood Rhoda in the darkness and spoke to them.

"Stay there, Betty, or I shall run away! Stay there and speak to me! Is Esther here too, and is mamma asleep?"

"Miss Rhoda," said Betty, "come in out of the

dark. You should have wrote to say we might expect you, but the girls are not in bed, and we'll have your room ready for you directly; I've kept it aired."

"But I'm not alone, Betty. Do you want us both? Are you sure you want us both?"

"Oh, come in, Miss Rhoda, do! No one would think you had been gone all this time, and you a-standing there outside as if not wishing to be back in your own home!"

"Rhoda," said Esther, "don't you want to see me?"

Rhoda stepped into the light; her dress was tucked up in front and pinned behind, she had a handkerchief on her head, and, on her back, she carried something in her shawl. She was smiling, her dark eyes were perfectly serene. Esther thought how tall and slender and beautiful she was; she had forgotten that she looked just so. As she went towards her, Rhoda stopped her with a gesture.

"Stay there! Now tell me what I look like! I've walked from London, I wanted to know how half my ancestors have lived, and I like their way in the fine weather. But say if you have a welcome for us both, little Betty, because one of us is asleep in my shawl; he has travelled just as mam-

ma did at his age for many and many a mile! One of us is my baby!"

"Come in, Miss Rhoda; you are too old to be play-acting like this! to say nothing of it's being disrespectful to your mamma! But wherever did you pick up that child?"

There was a look of disgust on Betty's face as Rhoda held towards her the baby she had extricated from her shawl.

"He is my own baby, I have brought him here to you and Madgwick, for I know that if there is no one in all the world to compare with Esther and with me, it is because only you two understand what education is."

Betty flushed angrily. "Miss Rhoda, you are mocking at us!"

Rhoda stepped into the room and laid one hand on Betty's shoulder as she stooped and kissed her cheek. In Rhoda's ways and in the modulations of her voice, there was something that was half-gracious, half-condescending. It sat upon her prettily enough, as it might on a young queen.

"I am telling you what is true, you silly little Betty. This is my own baby; his name is Felix. Felix means happy. Felix!" she said, holding up the child who opened black eyes and, undismayed, stared straight before him, "Felix, you are here

with your own people, you are to be like them all: as beautiful as my mamma, as fine as my sister, as wise as I! To Betty you will pray, and Madgwick will take you to the forest, for the forest is the mother of us all!" The child turned its head and opened and shut its small hands as Rhoda wrapped it in the shawl again and laid it in a large chair. Esther spoke.

"Rhoda, why did you not write to me? I would have come to you long ago."

Rhoda smiled. "I did not want you to come, I wished to come to you."

Betty was looking at her. "Miss Rhoda, if what you say is true, and I can't bring myself to believe it, when were you married, may I ask, and where may your husband be?"

Rhoda turned her calm, confident face towards Betty.

"It is true, my little Betty. Do you think I would bring any baby to you that was not one of us? Do you think that I would care for any baby that was not my very own?"

Betty seized her left hand.

"You should not be seen without your wedding-ring," she cried.

Rhoda, still smiling, looked at her hand. "Not even if it were a misfit?" she asked.

Betty went to her workbox and turned over its contents till she found a little screw of paper, in which was Laetitia's thin, old-fashioned wedding-ring.

"Then wear your grandmamma's," she said angrily; "there are things that must not be taken lightly, and I've never held with essentricity."

Rhoda allowed Betty to slip the ring on to her finger, and looked at it, and turned it round and round.

"A circle, an endless, endless circle; it makes me dizzy," she said slowly.

"Endless is what was meant, and that is what will give people the right to say you should not have come back here without your husband."

"I wished to come alone."

"It would have been better for every one if you had not."

Rhoda seated herself in the nursery rocking-chair, and leaned back in it with her feet upon the fender.

"You unkind little Betty! I want no one here but you and Esther and mamma."

Rhoda neither answered questions nor asked them, she fixed her dark, unfathomable eyes on Betty and listened to her with amused, indulgent attention. She had accepted Esther's presence

there without explanation, and she looked round the room slowly and at the familiar objects that the room contained as she said—

"The same nursery, the same Betty, the same Esther too, I think, but not the same me, for I have been away into the World."

She sat up and stretched her arms and took a hand of Betty's and of Esther's in her own, and held them for a moment, looking from face to face as she spoke.

"Betty, now you've scolded me, be good to Felix! Wouldn't any other baby in the world have cried to-night?"

Esther kissed her, and Betty's face was very serious as she turned away and took the sleeping child up from the chair. Rhoda went on—

"Betty, you must love him, for he belongs to Wistons. It's wonderful what Wistons means to me! I sprinkled him with water from the brook, and when I reached the woods I knelt down and kissed the ground and put a little of the earth in both his hands."

Betty was convinced, and her eyes shone on the child in her arms.

"I'm glad I never gave away any of the baby clothes," she said. The next moment she was severe again. "I beg your pardon, ma'am, for not

asking you sooner what your name is—your husband's name and yours, I should say."

Rhoda turned her eyes on Betty and smiled, pausing before she answered.

"Call me Mrs. Felix, if you like that better than the old way, Betty."

"Then what may be the baby's Christian name, ma'am?"

"Why Felix, too." She touched him with a finger-tip, and said, "Oh, Felix, tiny Felix, how doubly happy you shall be."

The child woke for a moment, but Betty hushed him to sleep again; Rhoda leaned forward and gazed at him attentively. When the child again slept soundly, she said—

"Betty, you'll love him, won't you? Because he's a Woolvenhurst and so am I, and so are you. We're living bits of Wistons, we're made of Wistons earth!"

"We know we're but dust, of course."

"Oh, what a Betty-speech! what a real Betty-speech!" said Rhoda, laughing softly. She turned again towards the fire and spread her warm hands out to the flames, in conscious well-being after the game she had played with cold and darkness. Her lips closed, smiling, as she stared into the burning wood. Esther looked at her surprised, half

estranged, and reflected that Rhoda would never let life break her or bewilder. Sitting there, calm and aloof, she seemed superior to destiny. Later, when she had eaten the food and drunk the tea brought her by Betty, Rhoda rose and put her hands on Esther's shoulders and looked into her eyes. She said nothing but kissed her on each cheek; they were long, soft kisses that called for none in return.

In the morning when Betty went to Mrs. Woolvenhurst's room she found Rhoda already there. The baby was lying on the bed; Bella, looking pleased, was watching him, and Rhoda said—

"Mamma is glad I have come back with Felix. Betty, when will he talk? Mamma can't tell me, and I've just remembered that you are the only one of us who knows anything about babies. Directly he was born I promised him that he should come to you."

Betty was at the bedside with a basin of water.

"Would you like to wash a little, ma'am, before I bring your breakfast?" she asked Bella in the same words and in the same respectful tones that she had used every morning for nearly a quarter of a century. To-day Bella, intent on watching Felix, turned her head aside impatiently as Betty, undeterred, sponged and dried her face and hands.

"He's a fat, good baby," said Bella, "but I should like him to have been christened here."

"I'm sorry he hasn't one name for this side of the family like. It do seem almost heathenish to go through life called by the foreign word for 'happy'," said Betty. Felix stuffed a hand into his mouth and gurgled; Betty smiled at him relentingly, and added—

"But there, when I'm used to think of him as Felix, no doubt I shall put no meaning to it."

Felix crowed rapturously and Betty took him up and pulled his garments straight.

"Madgwick must see him," said Rhoda; "I want Madgwick to see him."

Betty had long been accustomed to force the facts of her life into agreement with her principles; with a jerk of her head she now tossed away her lingering disapproval of the manner of Rhoda's return and her husband's absence, and later, when she sent word to Madgwick to come round and speak to her at the front door, she showed him the baby with explanations of her own which were entirely satisfactory to herself.

Madgwick looked at the child and said a little resentfully—

"He don't favour the Woolvenhursts."

"I've never heard as blue eyes can be counted

on for ever; I'm used to black and satisfied with them."

"Black is all right for gals, maybe, but for choice give me blue uns for boys."

"There's no sense in such considerations," said Betty angrily. Madgwick took no notice, he had the peasant's contempt for a woman's words, and held that "to be put out" was a privilege magnanimously allowed her by every self-respecting man. He, of course, would not display his interest in the child, but went on gruffly—

"To be sure it's a sight worse that he bain't born a Woolvenhurst. But there's no help for that no more than for t'other, and the name wor bound to go."

Betty was too well pleased with Felix to wish to dwell on this undeniable disadvantage; Madgwick's eyes were fastened on the child as Betty raised him on her left arm, and Felix looked round unsteadily at so much of the world as was before him till his eyes focussed themselves on Madgwick, who said in softened tones: "He be peart enough." The baby's round mouth widened into smiles, and, held fast by Betty, he crowed and jerked himself towards the old man, then, suddenly shy, turned and hid his face on Betty's shoulder. Madgwick's first words of praise being also his last, Betty, in another mo-

ment, went indoors with Felix, and Madgwick walked away.

Indoors Esther met them. "You like him better than all the rest of us," she said smiling.

"Oh no, Miss Esther, that would be wrong; but you see he do require most care, and so I give it him."

CHAPTER III

RHODA sat at the breakfast-table, her eyes dwelling approvingly, even affectionately, on the home-made bread, the yellow butter, the cup of tea with thick cream floating on the top, the dish of fresh-picked fruit. With a light touch she altered the position of a flower or two in the nosegay. She ate and drank with dainty appreciation of each mouthful; she said pretty things about the country fare. At last, when the meal was ended, she asked, "Where is Robin?"

Esther answered, "In London."

Rhoda looked for a moment at her sister's face, and was silent. But you could not guess what Rhoda was thinking of, however intent might be the expression of her dark eyes. She never asked for explanations. "To do so is vulgar, is degrading," she had said one day. She was silent for a moment before she took Esther's hand and led her out of doors. In the garden she went on speaking.

"I wouldn't have a blade of grass altered, nor a hair of Betty's head. It's wonderful to come back and find everything the same and to be part of it all

and yet quite different. It was for this I stayed away so long. But if we ourselves had not changed it would be merely tedious."

"Perhaps no longer being part of it may make one sad," said Esther.

Rhoda shook her head and smiled. Rhoda's smiles played about the corners of her mouth, they did not overspread her countenance nor light it up with mirth. The sisters were walking slowly by the borders, stopping to look at them; Rhoda touched the flowers with her fingers.

"You pretty, dear flowers," she said, in low, melodious tones, and then turned and looked at Esther.

"When we begin, we think that people are everything, afterwards we find that people are nothing."

Esther sighed. "I still think that people are everything. I am never outside their influence."

"How mistaken! You can never be your real self!"

"I suppose I never am."

"People," said Rhoda, "are disappointing. I was surprised at first. But you get through them, and then, beyond, you find things. All that one needs, always and for ever. There is no one we can bear to be with long, and first this made me sorry, but now it makes me glad."

"Not even Felix?"

"No, not even Felix! Betty and Madgwick educated us, and they shall educate him. I know the value of our childhood. Mamma, too, likes him very much; I think he is sure to understand mamma."

"Rhoda, could nothing make you unhappy?"

"Death could, if you died, or mamma, or Felix. We all must die, but it's so far off that we needn't think about it. Death is the only enemy we can't escape; but we can forget him."

Esther sighed again. "Love may match Death, I think."

Rhoda's face clouded. "Oh, that we can control; that we must prevent." The cloud passed from Rhoda's face.

Esther's eyelids were lowered. "If only our souls did not grow! But my soul aches and grows and will not let me be happy."

"But our development must make us happy," said Rhoda, with gentle decisiveness. "Oh, Esther, that is why I went away; I might have stayed here and been nothing!"

"Nothing! Am I nothing?"

"You always cared too much for people; and people destroy us if we let them."

"They leave us, and then we find ourselves, but it's very lonely."

"We should never lose ourselves," said Rhoda.

"But do you never wish that people wanted you? I daresay, though, they do."

Rhoda turned her enigmatic eyes on Esther and paused before she said—

"I want no one. No one, I mean, who isn't now at Wistons." She said the last words smiling. Esther turned away to hide her tears.

"It is all so different," she said, "from what I expected it to be. For me—and for you too."

Rhoda looked at her sister with the calm, contemplative expression which seemed to rest on people and take in everything she wished to know about them. Esther bit her under lip. Was she really a foolish, helpless, futile creature? she asked herself. What had been her motive for leaving Alding? Confusedly she tried to recall it while Rhoda kissed her cheek, and stooped to pick up a flower which she had dropped; she pinned it on Esther's breast with delicate touches of her brown, slender fingers. To Rhoda life was a spectacle with which she did not wish to interfere. She wanted to take her own way undisturbed—to come into no collision with other people's passions or strong feelings. It seemed to her that if she looked into any one's face, or held their hand in hers, they ought to see everything as calmly, as reasonably as she herself did. Rhoda

pitied those who differed from her, and sometimes in low, plaintive tones set forth her own opinions. But she never argued with any one, and when Esther differed from her and raised her voice in protest, Rhoda said—

"My darling Esther, after all you have not changed, and I am so glad. For if you had changed it would not be the same Wistons, and I want everything here to be for Felix just what it was for me. Then when he grows up he will realise all that this dear, unreasonable life has done for him." Rhoda spoke in the sweetest, the most patronising way.

"I think you despise us all," said Esther sadly.

"If you think that, you despise me," Rhoda answered, and when she saw Esther's eyes fill with tears she put her arm round her. "My darling Esther, how I hate to see you cry! My dear, foolish Esther! tormenting herself now, just as she tormented herself when we were children! If you, too, had a child of your own, you would feel so differently."

Esther shook her head.

"Only the whole world's child could satisfy me," she said, smiling through her tears.

Rhoda laughed. "Esther, you have not changed!"

Esther shook her head. "I have changed; I am a ghost thrust back into the old life, no one but myself knowing that I am a ghost."

Rhoda looked at her sister admiringly.

"I like the way you say things," she remarked approvingly, "you are very interesting. But I take all this life, this dear, familiar life, and hold it in the hollow of my hand. I am glad to understand it, I should be sorry if it understood me."

As she spoke Rhoda looked towards the house with great contentment. She glanced at her mother's windows, through which, blown by a current of air, the white curtains puffed outwards; at Betty, seen for an instant, as of old, at the nursery window. Madgwick, with his dog, came down from the woods and took some rabbits to the kitchen.

"Dear place, dear people," said Rhoda, with a sweep of her hand that seemed to include them all, "I should like to come back in a thousand years and find you just the same! But the notion that you should understand me! I would as soon be my own grandmother, whom, no doubt, dear Betty understood."

When Esther was a child strange fears had sometimes possessed her; she had never given expression to them; for who was there to understand that a vision of the depths of ocean or of the solitude of top-

most mountain peaks could cause a child's heart to stand still with horror and with fear? Now the fear was for Rhoda self-confidently solving the Riddle of Life, the Riddle of the Sphinx. What if the Sphinx, remorseless, for such presumption should destroy her?

Madgwick reappeared near the house, and Rhoda called out to him, "Madgwick, have you seen Felix this morning?"

"Yes," he answered, "and, for sure, he do grow every day. Many's the time I says to myself that it be hard on him as he bain't Woolvenhurst born."

"Then we'll call him Woolvenhurst," said Rhoda.

Madgwick shook his head. "We must bide by the law," he answered, as he walked away.

Rhoda watched him till he was out of sight, and then turned smiling to her sister. "Madgwick and Betty are my first presents to Felix. It would be an incalculable loss to him not to go, step by step, through every phase that we did. He must be brought up in Betty's religion; I don't think Madgwick has any. He must believe in ghosts and in everything that we believed in."

"Poor Betty," said Esther, "must she begin it all over again? She is like the old hen Madgwick

always set on ducks' eggs; some day Felix will swim away as you and I did."

"Oh, Betty wouldn't like a commonplace child, I'm quite sure she wouldn't," Rhoda answered. As she spoke she walked towards the nursery door. "Betty, you don't like commonplace children, do you?"

"I do like common sense," said Betty, "and if commonplace is the same as common sense, I do like it. There's nothing I despise so much as essentricity."

Felix was kicking on the floor, with Betty's watchful eyes not long away from him.

"I want Felix to feel very grateful to me for the gift of life, Betty," continued Rhoda. Rhoda's speech was always characteristic; she never cared whether or not it was appropriate to her hearer, but Betty was accustomed to not understanding her, and often did not listen.

Except to look at him several times a day with immense approval Rhoda occupied herself very little with her child. But she told Esther that she had mapped out all his future life, and that it was perfect. "There is nothing but Death that can ever trouble him," she said. She included him in the patronising approval with which she smiled down on Wistons and all that Wistons stood for.

Rhoda accepted people and admired them, as if they were on a stage performing for her benefit. Her own naïve, self-conscious superiority made her seem only superficially approachable. Her mother was more interested in Rhoda's baby than she had ever been in her own children. In the anticipation of teaching Felix to ride and to shoot Madgwick renewed his youth, became dictatorial again, and independent. Betty, who never found it difficult to deal with any situation that presented itself, was now a little absent-minded for everything but Felix.

Meanwhile Esther's faith in herself was being undermined by what she thought was the disbelief of others, or at least their loss of interest, in her.

CHAPTER IV

RHODA and Esther were together in the library. For an hour Rhoda had taken down books one after another from the shelves, appraising their merit as she read a page here and there and turned over the leaves from cover to cover.

"We have delightful books," she said at last, summing up, "but we must add to them. Papa never realised that there is a living literature; he thought that literature was dead."

Esther started at his name; it was so long since she had thought of her father. She suddenly remembered, very vividly, the day of his funeral. Rhoda continued—

"How very dead papa does seem! I cannot possibly imagine his coming to life again, there would be no object in it."

Esther was silently and remorsefully acquiescent. Rhoda continued—

"I wonder what our grandfather and grandmother were like, really. Our grandmother would not see mamma; she was a stupid woman. It is because of mamma that I am glad to be a Woolven-

hurst; mamma is the most interesting element of our family, but I suppose she represented to the people she came amongst all that was most antagonistic to their dull traditions. Felix must and shall appreciate mamma."

Esther, still silent, listened while Rhoda, in a few words, dispassionately disposed of all the joys and griefs that had ended in themselves. After a pause Rhoda continued—

"I can remember our grandmother; we never wanted to go and see her, did we?"

"No," answered Esther; "now I go to her grave sometimes to make amends."

"When we were children we never wanted to leave Wistons," said Rhoda, "and the drive was so long, papa was so silent and Betty was so cross. How hard she slapped us when we fidgeted!

"It seemed such a little house. I used to look up and feel sorry for grandmamma because the ceilings were so small. The straight-backed chairs had loose covers that touched the floor; I thought them so mysterious; I used to see them when I lay awake in the dark, and they frightened me.

"Felix must have all the strange fears and fancies that we had; I mean that you had and imposed on me."

Esther was silent and Rhoda took down more

books from the shelves; when she spoke again it was after a long, contemplative stare at her sister's face. Rhoda had turned towards the room and was leaning against the bookcase, with one hand hanging by her side and the thumb and first finger of the other stuck in her belt. She said, "Life is perfected by experiment; we must detach our lives from our failures. Above all, we must never for a moment forget our own personal dignity. That is sacred. If we have overestimated——"

Esther interrupted her impetuously, "Oh, Rhoda, let me tell you——"

Rhoda stopped her with a gesture. "Tell me nothing! nothing should ever be explained. To keep in perfect harmony with others and with ourselves we must live detached from one another."

The hardness of Rhoda's sayings was softened by the plaintive tones of her low voice, by the slow grace of her movements, by the dark splendour of her eyes.

"You speak as if we were automata," said Esther.

Rhoda crossed the room and stooped and kissed her sister's cheek. She said no more, for it was not in her nature to insist; she never wished to have the last word in an argument or to convert others to her opinions; Esther was silent, struggling to keep

back her tears. Rhoda turned to the open window.

"The fresh, sweet air brings back with it all the spirit of our childhood; I feel it blown in little breaths across my face."

Esther spoke. "When I am sad I want those children back, with a troop of little ghostly dogs racing around them."

Rhoda smiled and considered. "No. I don't want them back. I like all that pretty past safe in my memory."

Rhoda moved away, lingering here and there for a few moments before she left the room. She went out into the garden, and, turning round, waved a hand to Esther, who had taken her place at the window and stood there looking at her till she was out of sight, hidden by the trees.

CHAPTER V

Rhoda had gone to London with her mind steeped in poetry. She had that fine literary sense which must be inborn, for it cannot be acquired. Alive, as she was, to every manifestation of beauty in nature, she responded now to every expression of it in art. When she realised all that London held it seemed to her that she had come into a new world of wonder and of beauty, and that she was of it too. But she never wished to exercise her own faculties or to test her own powers: passive, she chose to stand aside, to feel and see and hear. She listened to music with overpowering emotion, her face turned away or hidden with her hand. Her eyes seemed to feel beauty; to be touched and caressed by form and colour. With parted lips she stood before great sculpture, motionless herself as the immortal stone. But as the fairest, softest, most delicate flesh covers a framework of unyielding bone, her poetical fancy, her faultless taste, her exquisite discrimination played over a character that was stubborn, unapproachable, unalterable.

Rhoda had left Wistons convinced that she was

experienced and wise and incapable of the mistakes and follies of others. Alone, in new circumstances, with new people, her strong individuality developed unchecked. Moreover, she was never influenced by others, and had little of the restraining sense of humour. Her personal value was not relative; it was intrinsic, and if her surroundings were of an inferior kind she could not be compromised by them or identified with them. She had faith in the saving grace of reticence, and, to her, behaviour seemed more vital than conduct. Those who came to her with commonplace confidences or for sympathy with every-day affairs were silenced by her pained surprise; they felt convicted of indiscretion, of coarseness. Flattery did not touch her; her opinion of others was the important factor, not their opinion of her. Her self-esteem was self-sustaining, and she disapproved of this, with a sense of added personal importance, or she despised that, with an increase of intellectual pride.

Of Robin's love-making Rhoda retained a charming impression. She had made it the standard of her own fastidious requirements. The young men whom she first included amongst her haphazard acquaintance could under no circumstances have attained to it. But Fortune willed that a certain Costa, who was filled with the pride of life, hand-

some, rich, and young, should meet Rhoda at a moment when she was in a trifling difficulty, from which he extricated her with the grace and quickness of his race. Because of the manner of his help rather than because of the importance of it, this first meeting was the starting-point of an acquaintance. When Rhoda met new people it was as if they came to her in the printed pages of a book.

Between people of different nationalities there is seldom complete understanding, and when chance made Rhoda known to Costa, he formed opinions concerning her which an Englishman would have known to be false. From the first they were at cross purposes, and while she accepted his professions of admiration and devotion with the condescension of a queen towards a subject, he listened to much that was not intelligible or interesting to him, with the superficial kind of sympathy that reflects every passing mood, and never flounders beyond its depth, there where the intellect questions and the soul broods.

To make love to Rhoda was to play a new and interesting variation of the eternal game; so new, indeed, that once, at the beginning, Costa almost made a false move. But an expression in Rhoda's eyes, half-doubtful, half-questioning, recalled him

to his attitude of distant, respectful adoration. Afterwards walking away from Bloomsbury towards that other London which held the circle that for the time held him, he stood still for a moment to say aloud, "It might become monotonous, and it takes time, it certainly takes time." Then as her image flashed before his mind—her tall, supple form, the shadowy blackness of her hair, her liquid, dark, mysterious eyes, her beautifully curved upper lip, the full lower one with its classic breadth from centre to corner—"My God," he exclaimed, "she is worth every moment of it."

It was a game for Rhoda as well as for himself he believed, and, in spite of her youth, not one that she played for the first time. That she should play it so well and for him, flattered his vanity.

The play indeed was graceful and pretty enough, and when one day Costa, with face aflame and eyes and voice both eloquent, told Rhoda that nothing on earth was worth one hour of making love to her, she, looking at him, admitted to herself that this way of it satisfied her. She had studied what she believed was Costa, his face, his figure, his attitudes and movements, the tones and modulations of his voice, and having found them all harmonious, having approved them all, she gave herself to the sweetness, the surprise, the finality of love. But

she never once wished to rest on the man's strength, or needed it, or desired to merge her life in his. For that which was Rhoda's innermost personality, that which distinguished her from every other mortal being, was, and would always be, and wished always to be, self-sufficing and apart.

The contrast between the reserve he had found so provocative and Rhoda's beautiful new boldness, so playful and so childish, so like, it must be said, her ways with Bella and with Betty, filled Costa with admiration. Not that he had the intuition or understanding to recognise and delight in her spontaneity and her simplicity. But he was sure that she was the most beautiful creature in the world, and with the most beautiful creature in the world it pleased him to be in love.

Costa had grown very tired of standing by her side in galleries and museums sympathetically silent or echoing her words; sometimes he persuaded her to come away and fare sumptuously. She could appreciate the stalled ox as well as the dinner of herbs, when either was perfect of its kind, and sitting consciously superior to the smart crowd in a fashionable restaurant, she was as calmly contemplative of the scene, and as far removed from it in thought and feeling as if, for her, the past had

been turned into the present, and she were the spectator of a feast in Babylon or Rome.

Costa was not very intelligent and he was without the wide human sympathies which make men wise, and though, when he knew his bearings, the quickness of his perceptive faculties served him very well, they did not help him to understand what lay beyond those narrow bounds. Not far below the polished surface were the crude instincts of the primitive man—unguessed at, undreamed of, by Rhoda. If he had not believed that other men when they saw her would desire her, he would scarcely have wished for her himself. Yet, when her beauty was becoming famous, he feared and resented every look of admiration that it received. He knew the ways of the world and the flesh, and for a time he believed that they were Rhoda's ways too. But when he tried the old experiments on her, they failed. She was too entirely inexperienced to be suspicious. If he absented himself for a time, when he returned she did not ask for explanations; he expected scenes and there were none; the marbles in the great museum were not more calm than Rhoda. For, though she had the most gracious and sweet ways with people, fundamentally she was self-absorbed. Perhaps her sense of the present was too vivid, and even her deepest

interest in others too superficial, for her to speculate on what any one, even Costa, might be doing when he was absent. He had not the faintest understanding of her, and when he found that she was neither suspicious nor jealous of him, he grew both jealous and suspicious of her.

The weak and vain are fascinated and in the end they are held, by the strong and self-sufficing. They are awed by that invincible imperturbability which neither their presence nor their absence can disturb. The conventional social standards that Costa held by in Rhoda's absence seemed to dwindle when he was with her, as he measured them against her magnificent sense of her own importance, and her measure of that importance became his measure of it too. He was impressed by Rhoda's calm, contemptuous sense of superiority to the world, to his world, and began to doubt the value of that world's probably contemptuous opinion of her. Both before and after the birth of the child Costa expected Rhoda to hint that for its sake they should be married: he was astonished that she did not. He watched her with the child: she was greatly pleased with it, but never absorbed by it. He began to listen with attention to what Rhoda told him of herself, her family, of Wistons. He looked out Winkfold on the map and in the railway

guide; it seemed to give substance to Rhoda's tales to find the little town in print, and he almost wondered whether he might not have outwitted himself by believing nothing that she told him.

In the early days when first he had said, tentatively, that some day they would be married, Rhoda looked at him gravely, and did not speak; her dark, wonderful, inscrutable eyes kept the secret of her own soul, and did not reveal what were her thoughts of him. But ignorant as each was of the other, he realised very gradually that she would not marry him. As gradually, his desire strengthened to make the tie between them binding. After the birth of Felix he said more positively than before that they must be married; but Rhoda's silence baffled him again. Costa neither understood her silence nor her speech, and his tact deserted him. He began by asking her at long intervals, cautiously, experimentally, and with the conviction that their marriage would be a perilous experiment for himself, a crowning grace for her; then he grew persistent, he set other talk aside, he lay in wait to implore her to marry him. But, though she never argued, in her present state of tacit opposition to him she no longer breathed the atmosphere of serene complacency which was essential to her.

When Rhoda discovered the insincerity of Costa's

interst in the things that interested her, and when she realised that he cared for none of them, she despised him; not for deceiving her—of that she did not think—but for being dense and ignorant and dull of wit. Rhoda's contempt was very silent and very thorough, but it was incomprehensible to Costa who held that nothing ever happened which he could not pigeon-hole by the light of former experience. So he protested inwardly, till he believed it, that there was no difference between Rhoda and any other woman he had known, and that a lover, a rival, was the explanation of her growing antipathy to him; thenceforward he was sarcastic or violent, clenching his fists, grinding his teeth, stamping with his foot. Once she said to him—

"If you thought you were injuring me, you must be——" She looked at him steadily, her voice fell, the sentence remained unfinished.

Costa did not understand, but he was relieved that she had spoken. "Forgive me!" he cried, "surely such beauty cannot see unmoved the suffering it has caused! Look! I am at your feet praying for your pity! Marry me! come to my country! My parents are great people, our child will be their heir; they will receive my wife and son; you will have admiration, I shall be envied."

Rhoda, looking on in profound dejection, said nothing.

Costa rose to his feet. "Did you never love me?" he asked hoarsely, with stormy face and bloodshot eyes.

Rhoda replied, almost inaudibly, "I suppose that once I did."

"You did!" he cried, "you loved me. What! You would have me doubt that too?"

He fell into a chair and covered his face with his hands; he sobbed, he shook convulsively. Rhoda looked at him and silently left the room.

Over and over again he reiterated such appeals, and Rhoda grew more frigid, more depressed. She despised violence; for love not in touch with a universe of interest and beauty, for love that was not instinct with poetry and offered on bended knee, she had no taste at all. One day he exclaimed, "You! you who were made for love, would you have me believe that you can live without it?"

Rhoda, the gloom deepening on her face, leant an elbow on the mantelpiece and pulled at a lock of hair. She looked from the man's excited face to her own reflected in the glass, and back at his again.

"I will have no rival!" the man cried violently.

"This is most dreadful. Will you not go away

and leave me?" Rhoda, looking at him with cold dislike, spoke in a low voice.

He came a step nearer, folded his arms, and said—

"Rhoda, I cannot leave you!"

The situation shocked her inexpressibly; she wanted to escape, but if she tried to go Costa would keep her there by force, and she would have preferred death to that indignity. Seeing him there, violent and stupid and overbearing, she knew that this was the real Costa; that other had existed only in her imagination. She was so absorbed in reflection that she no longer heard him rave, and he mistook her mood and, encouraged by her dejection, cried—"Marry me! we will think no more of this past life! it shall be forgotten! If any one should speak of it I will kill him!"

Rhoda hid her face for a moment in her hands.

"Is it possible that you are so devoid of understanding?" she sighed. A few large tears rolled down her cheeks, her humiliation was extreme. "Oh, go away at once," she continued after a moment's pause, not looking at him. There was an unaccustomed note of supplication in her voice, and he fancied that he had gained a point.

"It is for me to obey you always," he replied. He lingered, but she kept her face turned from him

and was silent. He stood at the door, his hand on the knob, his head bent, his eyes cast upwards tragically. He waited, perhaps wishing her to see how expressive was his face, how appropriate to his words was his attitude. But she was motionless until he went away and closed the door behind him. Then she looked up and listened; she did not hear the house-door shut, she was not sure that he had gone. She crossed the room and looked out of the window down into the darkening street, herself unseen within the darker room.

Outside the house Costa returned to the conventional bearing that was his second nature; not yet should his world raise its eyebrows at him, in amusement or in scorn. He stood still for a moment on the pavement and buttoned his frock coat, smoothing away each crease. As he walked away he lifted his hat and put it on again at a slightly different angle. Rhoda hid herself in the curtain and leaned forward: at the corner of the street she saw him stop to strike a match and light a cigarette. With a contemptuous smile she turned back into the room and took again her old position at the mantelpiece and spoke to the dim reflection of her face which the dusk was fast obliterating from the glass.

"What else should I have said to make him understand? Did not the reserve that is the natural

defence of every human creature keep me silent? Was I to be wanting in reticence because he has none?" Tears of humiliation again rolled down her cheeks as she realised that vulgar passions were seething around her and that against them pride, dignity, silence, availed her nothing. Self-censure, however, was foreign to her nature; she dried her eyes and, with cold antipathy and displeasure, blamed Costa only. Felix in another room cried; Rhoda, as she heard him, smiled. Turning from habit to the glass, though now the room was dark and her own face scarcely a pale blur within the mirror, she said—

"After all there is, there had to be, there always will be Felix." She paused and, thinking again of Costa, her face clouded. "But Felix is my justification," she added, and smiled again.

Her countenance recovered its wonted serenity, for Rhoda was neither prone to speculate about the future nor to dwell upon the past, and it was with perfect courage and self-confidence that she ran to find the child. She stood looking at him, talking to him.

"Don't cry, you foolish Felix! Wait a little and soon you will know you are alive! Ah! how glad you will be to find you are a king, and that I have given you all the kingdoms of the earth from the

very beginning! Many of them are here, Felix, and some day we will go away together and see the rest."

At the sound of her soft voice the child stopped crying. She looked out of her window into the gaslit street, and felt a sudden, irresistible desire to leave it.

"Wistons is lighted by the stars, and Wistons is only fifty miles away." And at Wistons she would be free, she said, frowning with renewed resentment, from the complications that beset her here. "It is quite time for Felix to go to Betty; we will start to-morrow. I shall walk all the way and carry him."

Rhoda thought no more of Costa that night, and the next days, wayfaring, she forgot him. Contemptuous of explanation she reached Wistons with a mind detached from everything that could displease her or perplex.

CHAPTER VI

RHODA, her black skirt trailing a little on the ground, walked across the grass into the woods and disappeared from Esther's sight. She loved to be alone now, as she had loved it when she was a child. Alone she was one of the sylvan company. She returned to them with looks and smiles of recognition, her mind undisturbed by backward or forward looking thoughts, her heart beating in unison with the very heart of nature. She went her way, disturbing nothing; understanding the woodland ways, the woodland growth, life sentient and insentient. If people would but have allowed Rhoda to move amongst them as if they too were trees, without questioning or curiosity or jostling of personalities!

Crossing the first cart-track, she chose the foot-path that led down to the parallel rough road on the lower ground, and followed it between the holly, and the slender beeches that push upwards through the fir-trees towards the light. A robin in the old, neglected hedge kept her company, hopping from twig to twig, taking short flights from bush to bush, watching her with round, bright eyes. The path

ended in steps cut in the bank and she descended these into the broader road and turned towards another of equal width that led, at right angles, onward to the brook. But turning, she saw Costa standing between it and her. He faced her, dressed for the country, but with too great elaboration. A soft felt hat was near him on the ground, flung down when he had first seen her, through the tree-trunks, coming towards him.

Rhoda's face was set in that pearl-like atmosphere peculiar to some dark-eyed, dark-haired women. It is the rarest beauty of complexion, indescribable, unmistakable. Her head was uncovered, and the soft lustre of her face was accentuated by the dull black clothes which she was fond of wearing.

At the sight of Costa she stood stone still and the sweet, responsive looks faded from her lips and eyes. Rhoda's sense of ownership was strong, and Costa's presence here was a trespass on her land as well as an outrage on her dignity, an attempt against her liberty. She was silent, she never took the initiative, but her face hardened as she looked at him steadily, unrelentingly. Costa folded his arms and nodded his head. She noted the well-known movements and waited for the prayers, the entreaties, the accusations to begin. If Costa hoped that she

would speak first he was disappointed; she did not wish to accuse him or to defend herself, she did not wish the past undone, she did not think about the past; it was her undisputed right to the present that she claimed. She saw his face flush, his hands clasped and raised and dropped. He stamped upon the ground, stood still with folded arms, his chin upon his breast. A little breeze was blowing, the sound of the sea was in the swaying tree-tops overhead; deeper in the woods a jay screamed. For a moment Rhoda's eyes wandered in the bird's direction, but came back attracted automatically to Costa by some slight movement that he made. There he stood, in her path, out of keeping with the scene in dress and gesture, as in thought and feeling; in discord with what had been such perfect harmony, both within her and without.

Though Costa knew that antipathy can succeed passion, he did not believe that, without a rival, he could himself inspire it. That, when fully revealed to her, his personality, his character, his attitude towards life had displeased Rhoda and depressed her he could not understand. He had listened to her opinions, sympathised with her theories, for so long; when he became inattentive it should have flattered her that her own distracting beauty was the cause. If he had not ceased to listen to what

she said, he would have ended by being more tired of her company than she of his.

He broke the silence. "One so beautiful," he said, "could not be cold."

Rhoda, with an involuntary movement, covered her face for a moment with one hand. Any sign of feeling on her part was welcome, and he continued rapidly in low tones—

"Marry me! in my country our marriage will legitimatise the child!" He moved a step towards her; Rhoda, instinctively feeling that the sound of her voice would check his advance, spoke—

"Felix belongs to Wistons," she said.

"It is incredible!" he exclaimed.

"Not incredible—incomprehensible to you."

"You despise me! But at whose instigation?"

"At your own." Rhoda spoke with melancholy contempt.

"Take care!" he cried, "do not provoke me too far! You and your lover shall not again laugh at me!"

Rhoda averted her eyes from his face. "You make me sick!" she said.

He did not answer, he was sobbing convulsively. Rhoda observed him, closely, critically; was it possible that she had been in love with him? Yes, she had; and but for Felix it would have been too humil-

iating an admission. She noted the shape of his head, his face, the line of his nose, the placing of his ears, she looked at his hands; it all seemed a kind of hieroglyphics to which she had found the key; and the meaning was not worth the trouble of interpretation.

Rhoda never invited a scene, she always moved away from the neighbourhood of one. But here there was no escape; for if she turned she knew that Costa would lay a detaining hand upon her, and at the thought she shuddered. Costa checked his sobs and spoke again—

"It does not please you that I am here; you thought that you had done with me; you came to meet the other, but I will meet him too!"

Rhoda drew back her lips, her teeth clenched and parted. She did not speak, and Costa continued—

"Do you think you can deceive me? Does such a woman as you leave one man unless for another? Again I ask you to marry me. Why not? We are noble, we are rich, as a soldier I am not unknown."

The contempt that was active in Rhoda's mind found words.

"A soldier! You! I have read the life of Julius Cæsar."

The man's face grew black with rage.

"If you were not so beautiful I should hate you!"

Rhoda's face burnt red. "Do not let that prevent it," she said.

They looked at each other and their souls leaped into their eyes and met in conflict and retired discomfited. They were silent again; the man furious, cruel, reckless, bent on a display of passion and revenge before Heaven and Rhoda; the woman conscious for the first time of something savage in her stubborn opposition. Suddenly she thought of her mother and Esther, of Felix and Betty and Madgwick; these were her people, they belonged to her. The man, standing there in her way, was an alien, an intruder, upsetting her moral equilibrium, arousing within her this new, cold violence. For her resentment, though violent, was cold. Her hatred was less hatred of the man than of some force that he represented, which she had herself evoked but could not control. The nervous tension seemed to give her abnormal strength, in another instant she might have tested it. She felt a piercing, consuming desire to be rid of him, to annihilate him, not that she might triumph, but that she might pass beyond him and remember him no more. At this moment Madgwick's voice was heard, clear in the distance, calling his dog to heel. The muscles of

Rhoda's face relaxed, her eyes opened wide, her mouth regained its soft curves. How often in these woods the sound of Madgwick's voice had brought with it the assurance of extrication from childish difficulty or disaster! So easily did she slip back into the old mental attitude that she was instantly more conscious of Madgwick's approach than of Costa's presence. She turned and stood, her profile towards Costa, calling to Madgwick in the voice that, loud or low, retained its sadness.

The woods grew noisier; the jay had called to him other jays, and they screamed together; through a ditch filled with dead leaves some small wild animal, pursued, scuttled in fear; two pigeons in a tree cooed hysterically; the robin sweetly sang his little song.

Costa listened to the man's voice in the distance and moved two steps that he might see Rhoda's full face. As he noted its expectant, eager expression, his own grew dark.

"So once you looked for me," he said, "and so no other man shall see you look again." He strode up to her, and, with a quick movement, struck her with some sharp, slender weapon. Rhoda was watching intently for Madgwick to appear; preoccupied, she did not catch the sense of Costa's words. But she was conscious of his abrupt movement tow-

ards her, of the force of the blow with which he stabbed her; she knew that something had happened that needed explanation. Her face expressed surprise, and with one hand she grasped the thing that was sticking in her breast. Before she fell to the ground she raised her questioning eyes to Costa, he stared back at her and did not speak. The next moment she fell upon the sandy road, and, not expecting death, died.

Madgwick was not walking in the path, but on the moss that spread beneath the trees; the dead branches which he trod on crackled and broke. As the sounds came nearer Costa took a pistol from his pocket and held it ready in his hand. But when Madgwick appeared from behind a thicket, and Costa saw the rough old weather-beaten countryman clad in corduroys, his fur cap pushed back from his forehead, his dog and a lad close behind him, he uttered an exclamation of dismay, for, in a flash, he realised that there was no lover and that this was the old servant of whom Rhoda had told him. Turning the pistol to his own heart Costa fell, cursing Destiny for this trick played on him.

The cheerful Sussex woods are primeval forest still.

Madgwick swore as he passed Costa's body, lying face downward in the sand, to kneel by Rhoda and raise her head. He was familiar with the signs, and he said to the boy, "This be death—run back and fetch Miss Hurst." The boy sped away up the foot-path. Madgwick took off his coat and folded it, and placed it under Rhoda's head, but he made no effort to restore her to animation. He had no doubt that she was dead, though indeed she had been alive within so short a time that she still seemed scarcely motionless.

Betty came running, her lips were pinched, her face was white, her eyes were full of fear.

"Oh, Madgwick," she cried, "whatever do the boy mean?"

Madgwick rose and relinquished the dead girl to her care. No grief, no shock, no bewilderment ever stopped Betty from doing the thing that needed to be done, and mechanically, instinctively, she set Rhoda's limbs and garments straight. She took a hand in one of hers, and with the other touched the weapon without moving it.

"Whoever done it?" she asked.

"Who done it?" Madgwick repeated, "why here be he who done it." He kicked the dead man's body, speaking hoarsely, disjointedly: "For what did you come here a-meddling with we? We

wanted nought o' you. We be here on our own ground, you should ha' let us bide."

Betty took no notice of his words or actions. "Madgwick," she cried, "take her up! Carry her to the house! 'Tis not fitting she should lie out here; she must go back to her home—it is her right."

"I dunno as I can do it," said Madgwick in a low voice.

"Don't talk so," answered Betty, "'tis to her home that she must go."

Madgwick bent his sturdy figure and took the long, slender form up in his arms. Betty followed; the robin, adapting his flight to their pace, returned with them. Near the house two or three scared servants stood waiting; Betty waved them aside and beckoned Madgwick to come indoors and follow her upstairs. Madgwick laid Rhoda down upon her bed, and turned, without a word, and tramped downstairs again.

Betty was alone with Rhoda when the door opened and Esther came in. She knelt and looked at Rhoda's calm face, scarcely calmer in death than it had been in life: when she spoke, it was in a whisper.

"Betty—how?—why?"

Betty shook her head; after a pause Esther whispered again.

"Betty, is it true? Can she be dead? Who did it, Betty?"

Betty spoke: "The man down there in the road beyond the sandpit; he did it, and he killed hisself too."

"Why, Betty?"

"The law must find that out." Betty clasped her hands. "The law! To think of the law inquiring into Wistons after all these years that it has never laid a finger on us!"

"Betty, Rhoda smiles; she doesn't care."

"The dead do smile, 'tis their way to comfort us."

"Betty, I am bewildered; I feel nothing. How could any one kill Rhoda?"

"There's a mystery," said Betty, "and I seem to wish I might never know what 'twas. But that won't be allowed, and so 'tis my belief the man down there in the Roughs is Miss Rhoda's husband; and if she did leave him and come home here, who will blame her now that he has proved hisself a murderer twice told!"

The breeze was coming into the room with a scent of mignonette from the garden. Esther rose and went to the window and stood there looking out at

the trees gently swaying, at the daisies staring upwards from the grass. She clasped her hands upon her heart: "There is such indifference," she said, and turned again towards the bed. "Oh, Rhoda, Rhoda," she cried out, "if it could be yesterday again! Betty, the most dreadful thing of all is that she is with us still, and that we cannot make her hear!"

Betty never offered consolation. "I don't hold with so much sympathising," she used to say; "we're here to endure to the end." But she always took care of her own people, and now she touched Esther's arm: "Come, Miss Esther," she said, "it's best as you should leave her now and come back by and by."

"Yes, Betty, and you must come with me. Rhoda is at peace and we are not; we will leave her by herself."

Outside the room Betty turned a questioning face to Esther.

"There's your mamma to be considered next, and it's not to be thought of that she is to be told. Not that I hold with concealments unless they're clearly pointed out to us."

Esther shrank back: "I can't go to mamma, Betty."

"Then wait for me in your papa's library, Miss Esther."

Betty looked anxiously after Esther as she turned away and left her. She waited a minute in thought before she went to Bella's room. There Felix was lying on the floor, and Bella on the sofa, bending forward with her arms crossed, was watching him.

"Miss Rhoda has left us, ma'am."

Bella slipped from the sofa to the floor and seized Felix by one foot.

"Rhoda shall not take Felix away! Felix is to stop here."

"Just as you please, ma'am," answered Betty, faltering.

"Felix must not go away from Wistons," Bella continued, holding him tightly.

"Very well, ma'am; Wistons shall be his home."

"Yes, Wistons shall be his home," repeated Bella, loosing her hold and looking up. "And Betty," she continued, "Felix is to sleep in my room."

"Your rest cannot be disturbed at night, ma'am," said Betty decisively; "Felix shall come to you early in the morning."

Bella pouted. "Well, not too early, Betty."

CHAPTER VII

While Betty was making tea in the library there was a sound of wheels in the lane and, looking out, she saw one of the Alding dog-carts driven rapidly towards the house. Esther sprang up and struck her hands together—

"Something has happened! I can bear no more."

"Then what would you propose to do?" asked Betty; "we've got to bear what's laid on us." She went away to the front door and spoke to a young man, who jumped down from the dog-cart. It was Alfred Childerston, Robin's first cousin, who had been his best man at the wedding. He spoke in a low voice.

"They told me that Mrs. Yaldwyn was here; her husband is very dangerously ill, I have come to fetch her."

"And her sister's lying dead upstairs; she was murdered in the woods to-day."

The anxious look on Childerston's face deepened—

"This is terrible! but I think Mrs. Yaldwyn

must come back with me to London; her husband asks for her." He spoke with mild authority; he was accustomed to decide for others; he decided most things for his own family; he was a very serious and a very kind young man.

"I can scarcely realise the full horror of what you tell me; I wish I could stay here and help, but the train goes in an hour, and I must take Mrs. Yaldwyn back with me. I should have asked you to come with her, but that is of course impossible."

Betty shook her head, her face puckered, she looked as if she would cry, and young Childerston looked away embarrassed. Esther appeared behind Betty; the young man took her hand.

"Robin is very ill; he is asking for you. It was an accident. He saw a house on fire; he tried to help. He was not burnt; he fell. Fortunately Lady Fanny happened to be there, and brought him to our house."

"I will come," she answered.

Betty went with her to her room and packed a few things; Madgwick, when a bell rang, setting aside a maid, went upstairs. He knocked at the door and took the bag, and put it in the cart. He and Betty stood together looking after Esther as she drove away; at the corner she turned her head and waved her hand to them.

On the journey Childerston arranged everything for her very carefully and considerately, but they neither of them spoke. Esther asked no questions; Robin was dying; that she knew was the meaning of this journey, and it was enough to know that. They reached a big house in Cromwell Road, the door was opened by a servant who looked injured and resentful. Childerston's young brow had permanent lines on it that were the result of the chronic state of mild domestic worry in which he lived: "Is her ladyship in?" he asked the man.

"Her ladyship is on the landing, sir, and his lordship, I was to say, is at a special meeting of the Royal Society."

Esther was shaking, Childerston gave her his arm and they crossed the hall and went up the first flight of stairs together. On the broad landing, outside the open drawing-room doors, stood Robin's aunt, Lady Childerston, flushed and agitated: the muscles of her face seemed to have given way, and all her features drooped. Her greatest troubles had been the mild infantile illnesses of her nice son. Now she lived in chronic dread that her servants would give her notice. She held out a limp hand to Esther, and spoke as if she were continuing a conversation—

"We none of us liked my brother's marriage,

but we never thought things would end like this. It's most shocking and very upsetting just as we're merely passing through town, for we're in the country really. And we've never seen much of Robin, though that, no doubt, was his mother's fault."

Her son was vexed. "My dear mother, I wish you would be persuaded to stop quietly in the drawing-room. I will take Mrs. Yaldwyn upstairs at once."

There was no look of interest on Lady Childerston's inexpressive face, and she continued—

"Of course it's very kind of people to inquire, but it gives every one a great deal of trouble. The Dean of Dripton sends continually for news, Lady Fanny was here again just now; it is not what I call considerate."

Esther had not spoken; Alfred Childerston's annoyance increased. He asked her to take his arm and they went together up the next flight. His mother called to him.

"Pray rest here for one moment, I will return immediately," he said, and ran downstairs again.

Esther was dazed, she stopped automatically where the young man left her. A door opened and closed on the floor above, and some one came down; it was Lady Fanny. When she turned the corner, she and Esther faced each other and Lady Fanny

stood still on the half-landing above Esther, staring down at her. There was no one within hearing, but with instinctive caution Lady Fanny looked round before she said in a low voice—

"Now are you satisfied? He rushed into the burning house—he said you, you, would wish him to save the child: the little beast is saved and Robin will die to-night. Why couldn't you have left him to us? He was good enough for us. Now go and see what you have done for him! it will give you infinite satisfaction to know that he will outrage your code of morals no more."

Esther did not move or speak, her eyes were fixed on Lady Fanny; young Childerston came upstairs and joined them.

"I want my mother to stop quietly in the drawing-room; do go in and see her. It is good of the Dean to think of us."

Lady Fanny could not answer; her face was ghastly, it would have startled the young man if he had not been too preoccupied to notice her. She nodded silently, and went swiftly down the stairs and out of the house.

Esther's feet felt like lead; the staircase seemed a mountain. Robin's cousin helped her to go slowly up the wide crimson-carpeted steps; she lifted one foot heavily after the other. She seemed to be

losing her intelligence, her grasp of what was happening; they stopped before a door and she strained her attention in a great effort to understand what Alfred Childerston was saying—

"I ought to tell you that his face is partly bandaged. But he does not suffer; we must be thankful that he does not suffer." Esther turned her head in response and stepped across the threshold. She walked round the screen that faced her, and was met by a nurse in uniform, who greeted her with the nurse's professionally cheerful non-committal smile. The room was filled with the scent of eau-de-Cologne. Esther grew confused and swayed on her feet; the nurse seized her arm, whispering, "We must consider the patient," and with a great effort of will Esther regained her self-control. She looked and saw a wide, low bed with a motionless figure lying on it. The forehead and eyes were bandaged, the lower part of the face was free. The nurse whispered again—

"He is quite conscious, and there is no pain; he will not suffer." She left Esther's side and went to the bed and stooped over it: "Mrs. Yaldwyn is here, she has come to stay with you."

Robin's left hand moved a little, and he said in sweet, faint tones—

"You didn't think you had got rid of me, did

you? You silly girl! Just as if I would let you go! I am far too intelligent to miss the meaning of everything for long, and now I know, I really know, how to live! No, you have not got rid of me."

The nurse bent her head and looked at him. "Not so much conversation, perhaps, Mr. Yaldwyn."

Esther was on her knees clasping the hand that sought hers, she could only answer, "Robin!"

"Ah, that was what I wanted! to hear your voice!"

"Robin!"

Esther said his name between two gasps, and she could say nothing else: "Robin!"

"You do believe in me? Say you believe in me!"

"Robin!"

"You know I am not the fool I seemed to be? Of course you know!" He gave a contented sigh and lay still.

The nurse took his other wrist between her thumb and fingers, she compressed her lips and shook her head. Esther raised her eyes and looked at the long figure defined beneath the bedclothes; at the bright hair, the bandaged eyes; at the expressive lips. On the other side of the bed the nurse stood waiting.

Esther's thoughts turned to the quiet room at Wistons; to the beautiful dead creature there mysteriously smiling to herself. Soon Robin said in sleepy tones—

"This is so perfect; nothing ever was so perfect; nothing can ever be more perfect. You are all the world to me! More, for all the world is less than you!"

Not the words, but something in his voice made the nurse bend down and look curiously at him. Robin spoke again—

"I am so filled with the content of knowing you are here that I've only just remembered I have not seen you yet. They say they can't take the bandages off my eyes until to-morrow."

With the hand that was free Esther clutched at her heart. "His eyes would never behold her face again," she thought. Robin continued—

"Did you really think you had seen the last of me? Of me, who never forgot you for a single instant! Why your love is nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to mine for you! Some day, you silly thing, you will understand!"

Esther pressed her face against the bedclothes and said more quietly, "Robin!"

The night came on and one nurse was replaced by another; the first gave some directions in a low

voice to the second, and they took off Esther's cloak and hat and waited on her. The lights were lowered; other preparations for the night were made; Childerston came in with kind and anxious face. "The doctor will be here at twelve," he said: "I shall see him, and remember that I can come at any moment; I shall not undress to-night." Esther looked at him gratefully.

The nurse drew a low chair close to the bed and Esther sat in it and laid her face against the end of the pillow that was under Robin's head. But Robin's hand groped for hers, and she pushed away the chair and sank down again upon the floor and took his hand and held it in both her own. Robin murmured in drowsy tones—

"Now this is all I want," and lay still, drawing uneven breaths.

The doctor came at midnight; Esther asked no question, and when he said a few words to her she answered nothing. She scarcely seemed to feel now, she only seemed to know—to know that Robin was dying, that he was brilliant and beautiful and young; that he was dying with his work unfinished: if he knew that it never would be finished, what would he feel? Yes, what would he feel? Esther grew confused, wondering what it was that he would feel. Again she thought of Wistons and of

Rhoda; of Rhoda who was dead, and who would not be dead if only it were yesterday. Time was so confusing—yesterday; to-day; to-morrow. Why should everything be blotted out by days? The nurse brought her food; Esther felt hungry and swallowed it. She looked at the nurse and began to think about her too; she supposed that every one had some meaning; what was hers? The night wore on; at dawn Childerston came in again to look at Robin lying asleep. Esther looked at him attentively when he questioned her; she nodded once or twice and shook her head, but did not speak. He went away again, and Esther began to think of her life at Alding. She remembered how intensely she had felt everything then. How strange! Now she knew that she was outside everything. Things happened, but she was not involved in them; how curious that she had once believed she was! She turned and looked at Robin; his head was in deep shadow, her eyes rested on his right hand, on the well-knit knuckles and the long, fine fingers that would never hold pen again. Esther caught her breath, her heart seemed to fail her, she felt an immense, an overwhelming sense of pity for the wonderful, unconscious, helpless creature lying there, the life spilt upon the sand, ended. Suddenly it came to her like a revelation that Robin had never

understood, had never been responsible; she was responsible for everything, she only.

Robin awoke and Esther spoke to him. "Robin," she said, "nothing worth doing is ever finished, is it?"

"Everything is finished, and nothing is finished. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she murmured, "yes, of course."

"You understand, you always do, and it's absolutely necessary that I should be with some one who does."

"Yes, that is what we all want—some one who understands."

"People pretend; they pretend to understand, but one day you find them out. Thank Heaven, I found them all out, and that has sent me back to you. That's why I went in and rescued the little chap. 'I'll save his life,' I said, 'to the glory of God and the honour of Esther!'" Robin's voice was almost inaudible; the nurse approached and bent over him and shook her head. Esther watched her as she turned away and poured something into a glass—

"Drink this, Mr. Yaldwyn."

Robin drank and lay still, and the nurse watched him with detached, impersonal curiosity.

"It's a mere question of, well, scarcely hours,"

she whispered into Esther's ear, "and I shall not be surprised if he never speaks again. But of course we shall do all we can till the last minute."

Esther, still kneeling on the ground, held Robin's hand; she felt her heart beat in her brain.

"The living, the dying, the dead," she thought, "herself, Robin, Rhoda. All that was and had been."

Perhaps at last she slept, she was certainly for a while unconscious. She awoke with a sense that immeasurable time had passed, and that everything had changed. The nurse was lifting her from the ground, and Alfred Childerston was saying—

"He never suffered, he never knew. We must be very thankful that he never knew. He was so gifted, and there was so much that he meant to do."

Esther understood that Robin was dead. "When?" she asked confusedly.

Childerston, kind and pitying, led her away from the bed to a door that opened into another room which had been prepared for her. Suddenly upon its threshold she seemed to come back from the outer void and to be caught in a crushing consciousness that she was tortured, in revolt, and impotent. Before the young man could push back the door Esther raised her arm and struck it with her open hand.

When, at last, she was alone she started up and put on her hat and cloak. "Robin was dead," she said to herself; "she had seen Rhoda's smile, she could not stay and see his." She would go away and leave this house and these kind, embarrassing people. She opened the outer door and crossed the landing, and lightly and swiftly descended the stairs. A servant was yawning in the hall; when she fumbled at the lock he opened the front door and stood and watched her cross the road and turn to the right. It was still early enough for the atmosphere to feel fresh, and there were comparatively few people in the streets. Excited, her heart beating with a dreadful violence, Esther's feet, as though winged, bore her along. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face flushed and swollen. She crossed a wide road; a woman stopped in front of her and stared; Esther took her by the shoulders and pushed her aside; a policeman looked after her with a sense of responsibility. There were more people as she went along; she began to feel conscious of some dull, opposing force that knew nothing, but was against her. She saw a gate on her left, and to her, country-bred, it suggested refuge. She opened the gate and closed it again behind her, and stood alone in an enclosed space. A few people stopped in the road to look at her; her spirit, in desperate straits, was seeking

help of spirit, and she scanned the countenances before her with other, deeper insight than that with which her gypsy ancestors studied many a face before claiming help of one.

A young man came out of a house, he saw the little crowd and crossed the road and joined it; when Esther had looked at him she beckoned. Without hesitation he opened the gate, and entering the enclosure stood before her. He was very young. His brows were slightly contracted above his large, grey, shining eyes. The fair pallor of his skin was saved from effeminacy by the strong lines of his forehead and nose and chin. It was the face of one who, with the temperament of the enthusiast and the ascetic which finds in causes its motive force, is saved by a fine intellect from the fanatic's narrowness. He came nearer and stood silent; Esther fixed her sad, disfigured eyes attentively upon him before she spoke—

"My sufferings are out of proportion to my insignificance."

The young man's eyes grew starlike, but for a moment he did not answer her; his impetuous movements, his eager countenance, were in contradiction to his deliberate speech. Then—

"Can any immortal soul be insignificant?" he asked, "and after what has happened to you do you wish not to suffer?"

"My sister is murdered, my husband is dead."

"Then you have much to forgive and much to suffer still."

"But why?"

"That you will never know, that you never will find out here," he answered. "Keep close to your own experience and trust that."

Esther's head drooped, but she had a vision of Rhoda and of Robin lying dead, and in quick revulsion she stood straight up and, with a gesture of her hand that included with themselves those in the road beyond the railings, cried—

"Ah! but we have a dreadful indictment to bring against Omnipotence!"

The young man knit his brows. "Perhaps," he said. "We have all thought that. But perhaps we are all omnipotent, with dreadful indictments to bring against one another?"

Esther was looking at him attentively.

"I once thought," she said, "that God needed me to help Him; but now I think He only wants fools, good stupidness, and I am not stupid. Life is very cruel if you are not dull."

"Would you choose to be dull?"

Esther shook her head; there was a moment's silence; then Esther struck one hand against the other and cried out—

"Oh, the uselessness! the cruel uselessness! You never saw them; they were wonderful, unlike every one else: but something within them seemed set against them. And yet they both—I feel—I know—died for an idea!"

The young man's face flashed sympathy. "Perhaps," he began, but Esther interrupted fiercely.

"Perhaps! we never get further than 'perhaps'!"

He answered in a low voice, after a moment's hesitation, with a smile of extraordinary sweetness—

"But we get very far if we trust our imagination and our heart."

"Oh, if I could trust them! if I could, if I could!"

The young man waited in silence; Esther pressed her hands to her temples and considered. When she was calmer she said—

"I will go back to my home. But they are all children there. And if I can never speak to any one that has understanding, I shall perish."

The young man spoke: aloud he said—

"It is because I can understand that you beckoned to me."

Under his breath, as he looked at her pityingly, he murmured to himself: "For it is your Father's

good pleasure to give you the kingdom." As he said these words his countenance seemed transfigured.

They passed through the gate into the wide road, watched, in silence, by the little group of people. The policeman, recognising the young man, said, as he followed them, "Is there anything that I can do, Sir Francis?"

Close to a cabstand they met a man with a dog coming towards them. The man's head and body were of normal size but his legs were deformed. He wore a soft cap, large, worn-out boots, and ragged clothes which had been roughly cut down to fit him. The dog was an old sheep-dog, and stood higher than the man's waist. The dwarf was a beggar, but the dog believed he was the king. Esther stopped and looked at them, covering them at a glance with comprehending pity. The man looked at her, gauging her intentions; Esther spoke first—

"Is this your dog?"

"Yes, we've bin together nine year; but he's a shepherd's dog by rights." A man of the streets, the beggar, in vague, unconscious touch with poetry, said this with pride.

"I can see how much he cares for you; you must be very fond of him. May I stroke him? I am very fond of dogs."

The puzzled look, half-crafty too, cleared from the man's face, a subtle change came over him. Esther's greeting placed him on an equality with her; for once he faced society neither a beggar nor a dwarf. Esther spoke again—

"I want to make your dog a present; will you take it for him?"

The man held out a worn, rough hand, a child's hand in size and shape, but withered.

"Thank you," said Esther, inclining her head. The dwarf took off his cap with a cavalier-like flourish, keeping his surprised, awakened eyes fixed on her.

Esther turned to her companion and said with a breaking voice—

"Now these are added to all the others; I must see them both again."

She got into the cab and leaned her head against the side and wept.

* * * * *

Some instinct made Betty bury Rhoda, not by her father, but next the grandfather she had not known and of whom she had scarcely even thought.

Bella died very suddenly, after no warning illness. They found her lying back on the sofa with a calm face, still softly outlined. Felix, indignant at her silence, was tugging at her gown. There was another grave dug in the grey sand, and Betty laid

her close to Rhoda with a gleam of satisfaction in her light brown eyes as she said, "They were always company to each other."

Death itself in any shape was no more mysterious to Betty than was Life; she bore these later shocks as she had borne the more decent passing of the earlier dead: "It is the Lord's will," she said.

But Felix needed her, and Betty old, tended him as Betty young had tended the older generations. One day when Esther said, "Betty, he is Felix Woolvenhurst as Rhoda wished," Betty, whose face grew very white, nodded and turned away.

* * * * *

And now that you have been told of them, tell me: did Esther and Rhoda live only because the shadowy Georgina died? Or have souls no ancestry, and is heredity of the body only?

And tell me, too, if character be indeed predestination, will nothing be deducted from the debit side when the stern angel sends in his account?

You have no answer for me, even you, who feel the irony of things; who have the ultimate, the crowning sense of pity; you, to whom has been vouchsafed the rare, the supreme revelation of vastness.

And I too have accepted the silence, and I wait.

THE END.